

# Wrestling Observer Newsletter

PO Box 1228, Campbell, CA 95009-1228

ISSN10839593

November 15, 2006

The history of WCW, the Monday Night Wars that brought pro wrestling to a popularity in many ways never seen before, and the Eric Bischoff reign and legacy in the business are back in the news with the release of Bischoff's autobiography a few weeks ago.

Due to the strong promotion, the book looks to be the best-selling WWE book since Ric Flair's book in 2004. The No. 16 opening on the *New York Times* best seller list is probably more impressive than it sounds. It got off to a better start than the disappointing results from the Eddie Guerrero and Shawn Michaels books. They were two of the company's biggest stars the year the books came out, and Guerrero's came out shortly after his death. The wrestling book market had obviously fallen from when it was a novelty and even very bad WWF books spent weeks on the bestseller list.

Most best sellers are available everywhere. I know in this market, almost none of the bookstores were even carrying the book. After one major store after another didn't have it, I ended up having to order it. All the great TV promotion done isn't going to be of a lot of benefit if stores aren't carrying it.

Naturally, since in the 389-page book, there are constant references to "dirtsheets," always negative, a lot of people have asked me my thoughts. Considering I often talked to Bischoff, and rarely a day went by that I didn't get at least five phone calls from WCW front office personnel, that fact needs to be out right away in his portrayal of wrestlers "leaking" information, when far more came from the office, authorized by Bischoff, then came from the wrestlers. Obviously I have a lot to say about that, but before getting into the book itself, more than a month ago I wrote a piece on Bischoff that was edited out of a few straight weeks of issue for space reasons and then I decided to save it until covering the book.

The reason I'm putting it here is because it was written before the book came out, and with no knowledge what he would say and that his tirade against "dirtsheets" would be a central theme. The impetus was an internet interview done by JBL on the WWE's web site with Bischoff, because when it was over, I didn't feel this was an attempt to change history by JBL as much as I was surprised how little JBL, a pretty smart guy on business, understood about the business of WCW and the wrestling war he was so gung-ho about from the other side. Granted, he was on the road and he was something of a locker room leader/enforcer, and to him, WCW was the enemy. Whether you talked about loyal fans or loyal wrestlers, there was always the feeling the field wasn't level during the period WWF was losing. In this business, the field is never level. WCW had many advantages being owned by a network. WWF had many advantages. They were a long-time incumbent brand name, having Vince McMahon as the undisputable leader, and not being overseen by corporate officials who didn't understand the very unique wrestling business. They also lucked out by having characters at the level of Steve Austin and The Rock at the same time.

So first, I'm going through my own historical overview of the life and death of WCW.

Eric Bischoff's book, "Controversy Creates Cash," which WWE is releasing with a huge push on 10/17, is no doubt going to be the most interesting wrestling book of this year, if only due to the perspective.

For years, WWE has portrayed the Monday Night Wars battle as giant media mogul Ted Turner trying to bully passionate wrestling promoter Vince McMahon, who despite having his talent raided and playing dirty, in the end, Vince won and put "Ted" out of business. Vince even, in the "Rise and Fall of ECW," tried to categorize that he was trying to help ECW, while WCW was trying to ruin it, even though both companies, desperate for new attractions, were trying to sign ECW's talent. McMahon did pay Paul Heyman \$1,000 (or \$1,500, depending on if you believe what WWE officials claimed at the time or what Heyman claimed later) per week for many years as a consultant, with the expectation that when his talent outgrew him and wanted more money, he'd steer that talent to WWE. With a company losing seven figures per year, that much money hardly constitutes funding it, but that's the history they want you to believe. Kevin Sullivan, who was

the WCW booker, was always friends with Heyman, and his then wife Nancy (now Nancy Benoit), worked as a manager in ECW and directly recruited talent WCW was interested in when she was there. Sullivan has said that in almost every case when talent was recruited into WCW, they called first, and he called Heyman and made him aware of it.

What people never realized about Paul Heyman, is that no matter what he said publicly about who he hated, he was in contact with almost everyone in the business during the period he ran ECW, and knew as much as anyone about what was really going on everywhere. However, Bischoff did at times try to put together a stronger relationship with Heyman, because of the belief an interpromotional angle would mean business along with other reasons. Heyman never took a deal, although he was enticed at one point. My belief is that Heyman felt when he got national television, his ability to book a superior product to a mass audience would make his company profitable. Obviously, that didn't happen. To the casual audience, they saw those \$500,000 budget weekly shows put on by the other groups, and ECW couldn't compare. Yes, the super hardcore wrestling fan may have preferred the ECW fingerprints of presenting a harder and more violent style, but they couldn't match the look, the star power and the quality of wrestlers appearing on the other shows.

But Bischoff's version of history is going to get very interesting. Having dealt with all three "leaders" during that period, they were all charismatic people, who talked brash, and certainly loved to back it up. They were all consumed by the business and the fight. Bischoff never gets his fair credit for changing the business, because the boom period, even though Austin was the biggest star by the period when business reached all-time record levels, was created at first by WCW and Nitro.

In late 1995, this industry was in terrible shape. A year earlier, the North American industry was in danger of being a third-world nation when it came to wrestling. Japan was on fire and clearly No. 1. Mexico had fallen from its peak of two years earlier, but it still seemed healthy. UFC, which had no television coverage at all, was dueling both WCW and WWF equally on PPV. UFC was about to be hit with a surprising torpedo by a nervous cable industry, who got pressure from Senator John McCain. One-by-one, virtually every major cable company in North America stopped airing the PPV shows, seemingly insuring death of the genre. At the end of 1995, two of the major people in the business, one who worked directly under Bischoff and another who worked directly under McMahon, were very negative and scared as both companies died on their final PPV shows of the year (this was almost four months into the Monday Night Wars), feeling pro wrestling was in trouble because it would be unable to compete with the "real" aspect of UFC. Barely two years later, pro wrestling was never more popular, and UFC barely had a pulse. In late 1996, when ECW first closed its deal to get on PPV, one of the reasons it was able to get into what was at that point a lucrative closed industry is the feeling it would take the dates replacing the expected to be dead UFC.

But back in August of 1995, the month before Nitro started, WWF had bottomed out in popularity. It averaged 2,300 fans paying \$32,000 per house show and averaged a 3.2 rating on USA for Monday Night Raw, a one-hour show, featuring maybe one competitive match a week, and a few squash matches. WCW, even with Hulk Hogan, averaged 1,800 paying \$19,170 per house show. Keep in mind that Hogan worked very few of those house shows, and when he did work, they drew considerably more than that. Both groups that month had a major prime time TV special, with the WWF special hyping SummerSlam doing a 2.8, and the WCW special, a Clash of the Champions, doing a 3.0. As you can see, WWF was ahead going into the Monday Night Wars, but not nearly as far ahead as most histories have stated.

The fear was Nitro going against Raw would split that 3.2 rating Raw was averaging that year. Expectations were WWF, the incumbent in the time slot, would get the majority of the viewers and WCW would be left with an embarrassing by the standards of the time, rating for prime time wrestling.

And if everything was done the way wrestling was done, that probably still wouldn't have happened, but things changed. Nitro changed the face of wrestling television in the U.S. It was the first TV wrestling show to become like Raw is today, where the TV show was bigger than a house show, and combined main event matches with a show largely filled with either big stars or great workers, and developed show-long storylines backstage, or even out of the arena.

The first Nitro put Hulk Hogan vs. Big Bubba Rogers, Ric Flair vs. Sting and Justin Liger vs. Brian Pillman in a one hour show. Plus, it delivered the big surprise. Lex Luger, a major star for almost a decade and the person who just two years earlier WWF was grooming to be its flagship wrestler (after he had failed to reach that level in WCW even though the company had similar goals for him) showed up unexpectedly. Soon, what at one time was a wrestling dream match, Hogan vs. Luger, took place the next week and Nitro beat Raw right off the bat (the first week Nitro went unopposed as Raw was pre-empted for the U.S. Open tennis tournament). At the time, Raw taped usually every other week, while Nitro was always live (with a few exceptions during its run), a point Bischoff continually pushed in the early years before things changed. While Raw ratings for taped shows were the same as for live shows, it did give Bischoff a chance to give away finishes of Raw shows. While people remember the time where it bit him in the butt, the night he ordered Tony Schiavone to announce Mick Foley was going to win the WWF title on Raw, which sent hundreds of thousands of viewers immediately switching to Raw, in most cases, I sensed it ired the WWF officials, wrestlers and its most loyal fans more than it ever made any difference one way or the other. I never recall casual fans thinking much of it, although they were aware and thought it strange. In a sense, it represented WCW's approach that there were no rules in a wrestling war—the same approach Vince McMahon spent a near lifetime living. It was a much talked about move, that only on rare occasions made any difference in fans switching or staying, but made Bischoff seem ballsy and his opposition furious. It heightened tension in the industry and in hindsight, there was a realism lacking today. Even though the shows themselves were scripted entertainment, the Monday Night Wars themselves were real, and everyone knew it. Each side developed a fan base, a large percentage of whom disliked the other company, for whatever reason. And both sides, every week, were under the gun to come up with concepts to lure the "swing vote," the percentage of fans who would switch back-and-forth depending on the segment. The big stars, who could capture the swing vote, and in some cases, were so over they could get the loyal fans of one side to check out the other because they didn't want to miss the Goldberg squash, the Austin angle, or people like the NWO, Rock, Flair, Sable, the McMahon family and others whose segments glued people to their sets.

The war was pretty even for the first six months, which in itself was a big win for Bischoff, who everyone assumed would get crushed, embarrassed, and lose his job. From the first week of the confrontation, more people were watching wrestling than at any time in years. The first few months, both shows were doing less on their own than Raw had been doing unopposed, but the total audience was expanding significantly.

A combination of the Scott Hall showing up after leaving WWF, and going to two hours to the late spring of 1996, put WCW on top for about a two year period. When Kevin Nash came in, and Hogan went heel to join the NWO, it changed wrestling. WCW not only bit a chunk out of the Raw audience, but expanded the overall wrestling, particularly among viewers over 35, who could see Hogan, Flair, Randy Savage, Roddy Piper, Sting and others, who they grew up on, but in weekly angles and matches. The NWO vs. WCW feud became the biggest feud as far as drawing money, in the history of wrestling up to that point. Eventually Raw went to two hours, always live. Nitro went to three hours, which was a success at first, particularly increasing ad revenue by a huge percentage while incurring roughly the same production costs. But in the long run, almost nobody will deny three hours was too long, burned out the audience and led to overexposure and a decline in interest. Thunder and later Smackdown were created. After both sides did record business in 1998, the WCW product became unwatchable in 1999, combined with WWF's product elevating and becoming the most successful period for any wrestling company in the history of the business. The company went down incredibly fast. There are many reasons for it, but the overriding reason was one product was far superior to the other. During 2000, even with WCW dying, the overall viewership between the two shows was incredibly high because of the huge numbers WWF was putting up. But even at the end, there were three million or more fans who watched every week, who were WCW loyalists and for whatever reason would never be fans of a Vince McMahon product. When WCW folded, those fans went away, and for the most part, were never to be heard from again.

At the time, and even more today if people look back, an aspect of the popularity of Nitro is overlooked. The numbers everyone looked at were always the head-to-head numbers. But USA and TNT had a significant difference as it pertained to the West Coast, which has a high percentage of the country's population. For most of its run, Nitro ran from 5-7 p.m. on Mondays, out of prime

time, because on the West Coast while Raw ran in prime time, and the live shows were not head-to-head. WCW had a huge advantage in exposure, because they would air a replay, which allowed them to both hit the West Coast in prime time, and allow Raw viewers the opportunity to see the show. The second feed numbers were not added into the total, so the total number of viewers watching Nitro was significantly more than Raw, even in the weeks Raw would win. But Raw had the technical advantage in comparing the "first-run" numbers because that live feed airing in prime time on the West Coast. Nitro had the overall advantage because its replay hit the West Coast and viewers nationally had two chances to see Nitro. Soon, both sides started playing games. WCW would start a few minutes early, and end a few minutes late. Eventually, Raw did the same thing. The overrun period on both shows were when the big angles usually took place, a tradition that continues to today. For example, in 1998, when history has it WWF took back over, and when it comes to actual hotness of the product, they did, more people still were watching Nitro due to the replay. Even though the seeds for the failure were planted in 1998, when WCW was doing its record business, more actual people saw Nitro every Monday night. Still, because everyone only looked at head-to-head, and WCW numbers were dropping, even as they did three Nitros in a one month period in December and January of 1998-99 that did around 30,000 paid at the Astrodome in Houston, TWA Dome in St. Louis and Georgia Dome in Atlanta, WCW was panicking because they were losing. It should be noted that all three houses were drawn without Hogan, who, jealous of Jesse Ventura winning the Governor's race (both Hogan and Bischoff hated Ventura, and it went both ways since Ventura was dropped as an announcer by WCW), and Hogan announced his retirement to run for president. Hogan was at the third show, pushed as some sort of a farewell, but virtually all the tickets were sold before Hogan's appearance was announced.

As crazy as it sounds, during the middle of that period, which was the Starrcade show where Kevin Nash pinned Bill Goldberg, after the show, Mike Tenay, Bobby Heenan and Tony Schiavone went out. Heenan and Tenay that night were saying it was over. Schiavone thought they were nuts. The next week Nash dropped the title to Hogan in the one-finger touch deal. It wasn't an immediate collapse, as the company did well through March. The largely atrocious TV had started months earlier and was starting to take its toll. Then they fell off the cliff so hard it is mind-boggling. People can say what they want about some WWE segments, or perhaps the product is not as inspired as it once was, or point to logic holes, but WWE never puts on shows where people leave furious, vowing never to return. WCW was doing that almost nightly. By the fall, the company was starting to lose money and Bischoff was sent home. Vince Russo and Ed Ferrara were hired to take over creative. They hotshotted like crazy. The decline stabilized to an extent, but even more long-term credibility damage was being done. Then, the two people getting the biggest push, Bret Hart and Bill Goldberg, both went down with possible career ending injuries. Hart never returned. Goldberg came back but by that time place was a creative disaster like never seen before. Russo had his power taken away and quit. Kevin Sullivan was put in charge and things got worse. Then Bischoff & Russo were brought back together. They couldn't get along and Bischoff walked out. He banked on the idea Russo would destroy the place, and at the time privately told people he was giving Russo enough rope to hang himself. What 15 months earlier was a company having a business success level that no company in history had ever had, was now losing 15 times as much money per month as WWF was doing when Vince McMahon had to take out big loans to keep the company floating. There have been many gigantic stories and moments in modern wrestling history, but none were bigger, both at the time, and with more long-term repercussions, than the ending of WCW.

It's painful to relive and numerous people, both completely innocent and guilty as hell, working in the company, had their lives shattered. Ironically, some of the biggest culprits came out of it the best. It did damage to the industry that in many ways will be felt forever.

Bischoff and JBL had an interesting video discussion on the WWE web site, which kind of showed more how the wrestlers on the WWF side during that period were brainwashed. JBL is pretty intelligent, particularly on business matters, yet in his own business, he came across as not really understanding and simplistic regarding the big picture in his discussion with Bischoff.

JBL said that wrestling was TV programming for WCW and it didn't matter if they sold any tickets. Nothing could be farther from the truth because it was the inability to sell tickets at the end that led to the death of the company. If anything, it is today's WWE, getting \$92 million per year based on current deals for television rights fees and ad sales, plus so many licensing and merchandising deals in place that is less reliant on having to sell tickets to live events and PPV money than any wrestling company in history. He said Bischoff had an unlimited checkbook. Bischoff said he first had to prove himself, noting he took over a company with \$24 million in annual gross revenue and was losing \$10 million per year (which sounds like an exaggerated figure, as in early 1994 when WCW's financials were done for the year 1993, we got a copy of them and losses that year

were listed as just over \$6 million). The fact is, when Bischoff made most of his big financial moves, the company was making money on its own.

Bischoff blamed the bad situation he inherited on Bill Watts. Watts always claimed he took over a company that was losing \$6 million to \$8 million per year, and he got the losses down to approximately \$400,000 in 1992, because he was hired to slash spending. I can only tell you I saw a company balance sheet a few times, and \$24 million in revenue and \$30 million in expenses were where the company was when Bischoff took over, which was a year after Watts was gone and during a period Sharon Sidello (at the time Ole Anderson's girlfriend, who Anderson joked in his own autobiography was one of a slew of people who had no clue about wrestling that ran WCW, saying he even lived with one of them) and Bischoff were the company's main executives. But those numbers are misleading as well. WCW under Jim Herd, Kip Frye and Watts, got virtually no money for television, and in the early years, their PPV revenue was split between WCW and Turner Home Entertainment. The idea is they were to produce hours of television every week that would build up their live events and PPV shows. None of them were able to turn a profit with those splits. Bischoff was the guy, to his credit, to negotiate the company getting paid, at first, \$8 million per year in television rights fees, since any other programming doing that kind of ratings would cost the station far more. That figure alone would have made WCW profitable from its first year under Herd.

While the lesson of Watts, perhaps the most brilliant booking mind of the 80s, having been away from the business for five years, not following it, and then coming back and being out of touch to the changes is one of the greatest lessons of modern wrestling, you have to look at the mentality at the time. Kip Frey, a lawyer with no wrestling background or knowledge, but actually a good guy who really wanted to learn, got a kick out of hanging out with stars, and when key contracts came do, most notably Brian Pillman and Heyman (who was manager Paul E. Dangerously), he signed both to big money (as in \$225,000 base and incentives) contracts. At the time, that kind of money was unheard for a mid-carder like Pillman or a manager. The company was losing money, so they brought Watts in to cut costs, and Watts tried to bully both into relinquishing their contracts to save money. If Watts was brought in and given the strategy from the people in charge to beat Vince McMahon in 1992, like Bischoff was told specifically by Ted Turner in 1995, I don't know what would have happened. Most likely he wouldn't have been nearly as successful as Bischoff ended up being, because he had an old school wrestling mentality.

It would have been a high risk move to agree to the demands Hulk Hogan wanted for coming (which included a guaranteed \$600,000 per PPV event plus, if the company's share of the PPV grossed more than \$2.4 million, Hogan was cut in for 25% of the PPV revenue; as well as \$25,000 for every house show or television taping he worked, not to mention in his contract he had creative control over all his match finishes, which he used to include all his angles and scenarios, as well). Whether Watts could have made the deal with Hogan is questionable. But one never knows as the situation never arose. Within his territory and until the death of his territory, Watts was handily beating McMahon in live attendance and killing him in television ratings. Watts' product in 1985 in a bad time slot was beating McMahon's on the same station (TBS) when McMahon had the advantage of tenure and the traditional time slot.

If Watts was told to spend and win his attitude would be very different than we want costs cut and not to lose money. But Watts in 1992 and Watts in 1985 hadn't changed as much as the business itself had changed over the same period. The funny thing is, the business has changed this year more in the past nine months than it did in that same seven year period, and the people in charge, even though they never left, in many ways, by being caught in their cocoon, are in a similar position as Watts.

Watts had set up a huge offer, although not in the Hogan stratosphere, to bring back Ric Flair in 1993 (although Watts was quit/fired by the time Flair showed up), although it wasn't even in the Hogan stratosphere. You can only speculate what could have happened. What did happen was Bischoff made that move, and it's a move that can't be overemphasized in importance. WCW was always the red-headed stepchild of the Turner organization. The executives couldn't kill it because wrestling helped build TBS, ratings were always above average for the station, and sometimes great. Ted Turner had an affinity and loyalty to it and made it clear in 1992 when the heads of Turner made the call to ax the money losing division that it wasn't going to happen, and he didn't want the subject ever brought up to him again. When Hogan signed, even if ratings at first did not turn around (although Hogan from the start was a huge draw on PPV, and he was worth every penny he was getting at least through the spring of 1999), his celebrity was so strong the company was, well, less embarrassed that it had a wrestling division. In 1998, when the Georgia Dome was filled with 41,000 fans and tons of the higher-ups in the company the night Bill Goldberg beat Hogan, wrestling was even a shining light in the company. But the time was brief.

The death of the company in 2001 came partially because by that time,

Turner was out of power over the stations he created. But revenues were collapsing, ratings were falling, popularity was plummeting and the money losses were out of control.

In hindsight, many different names, from Bischoff, to Hogan to Vince Russo to the selfishness of many of the top tier wrestlers, to the AOL/Time Warner Merger to Brad Siegel to Jamie Kellner have been either scapegoats or blamed for the end result. Because there are so many reasons, everyone blamed gets offended by it because they can point to a dozen other things that caused it. No one person killed WCW. But everyone who had a hand in creative from 1999 until its closing deserves the majority of the blame for putting on generally terrible television, and running off a huge fan base on record time. Had the fan base stayed, they would not have been a liability on the corporate books and as much as Kellner did hate pro wrestling, he would not have been able to ax a profitable and successful division if it was producing the highest rating programming on his stations.

This entire industry changed in early 2001. ECW folded. UFC was sold to Lorenzo and Frank Fertitta. And WCW was announced as being sold to a consortium called Fusient with Bischoff as the creative head. It was the strangest thing because there was a press conference announcing the sale. At the time, I was talking very regularly with Bischoff. WCW was such a financial mess, but Bischoff talked a good game. So much damage had been done that I didn't see how a private company with limited funding could ride out the early losses. But this business historically has gone up and down in a hurry, and WCW even in 2000 took in \$125 million (and spent around \$187 million). There was a ton of wasted money and a smartly run organization couldn't fight head-up with Vince, but after getting rid of bad contracts, with time, it could have rebuilt. Bischoff's Fusient and Vince McMahon were the only people seriously negotiated with about buying WCW. They were hardly the only ones interested. Jeff Blatnick noted to me that a New York group headed by one of the local sports cable franchises was willing to put up in excess of \$45 million, and that was a company that would have been able to sustain early losses. Bob Meyrowitz, who was my boss at Eyada, which turned into a money pit as the concept of ad supported internet radio didn't work, was very interested in buying it, but Eyada was going down at the time and his priorities were trying to save that business, and after it went down, he was made he didn't have the time to put together a bid. Jerry Jarrett, who was consulting with Siegel regularly and had an inside track into everything that was going on at the time, wanted to buy it, as his mentality is how could you not turn a profit on a company still grossing \$125 million a year even when booked into oblivion. But Siegel never entertained other offers.

McMahon nearly got the company in late 2000, but he had an exclusive contract at the time Viacom paying him \$28 million per year in rights fees plus sharing heavily in ad revenue, to where he couldn't put any programming on rival cable stations, which the Turner stations clearly were. McMahon tried to explain to Viacom how owning both brands on rival stations would be good for everyone, but they wouldn't buy it. He had to pull out. Still, Stuart Snyder, who was the president of WWF at the time (the McMahons, for whatever reason, had hired an outsider to run their business), had a history with Turner and dialogue continued. Snyder reported to McMahon after the sale to Fusient and told him the Turner people said that they were not selling to Bischoff. This was after the public announcement, and a period when Bischoff was largely in control of the creative direction. Largely, I say, because as mentioned, Bischoff and I were talking constantly and discussing his plans. For as much as he buried me in his book, he was taking my advice on talent, asking me for outsiders who could help with creative (in fact, he hired John Muse, a regular guest on my radio show who had a knack for booking although had never worked for a major office; and secretly worked out deals with Joey Styles, Don Callis, Rob Van Dam and others to unveil). However, Bischoff would make plans one week, and days later the corporate brass at Turner would continually nix those plans. He wanted to shut down operations for a while, build to a big grand opening and slowly move back into things like house shows. Bischoff took most of the key top talent, such as Bill Goldberg and Sting in particular, off TV, wanting to save them for big returns, so ratings fell to what I would consider artificial lows. Hogan had been off the air for a long time by this point, and while the two remained friends, he had a lawsuit pending against the company and bringing him back at first looked to be impossible. But the Turner people were forcing him to change plans, not wanting to lose the ad revenue by shutting things down for as long as he wanted. Things were changing daily and even Bischoff wasn't as in on everything as you would have thought. Wade Keller broke the story of Warburg Pinkus, a venture capital firm that was fronting a lot of the money, had pulled out, as after doing due diligence on the company's finances, they found things were a lot worse off than they had been led to believe. This forced a major restructuring of the deal with less money up front. Bischoff wasn't aware of any of this until after it was reported and in that case, I was the one who told him. He didn't appear to believe it when I did, denied it because he didn't know, and it was clear his own partners were not keeping him in the loop. Bischoff wasn't aware the Turner organization had decided to drop Thunder, and that they

didn't want wrestling on TNT any longer, wanting to position it as a high-brow station, but the idea was Nitro would continue on Mondays opposite Raw on TBS. That violated the point in the deal where both Nitro & Thunder would be guaranteed for ten years and Turner would remain a minority partner and pay rights fees.

What killed WCW was the hiring of Jamie Kellner as head of programming for the entire Time Warner network of stations. Jim Barnett noted to me the day of the hiring that Kellner hated wrestling, but, as someone with a relationship with Turner going back to 1972, he said Ted would never allow wrestling to be canceled. Even Barnett wasn't aware how much things in his own company had changed, where Turner was so far out of power that he no longer had any input on programming on the stations that still bore his name. Kellner's first move was to cancel wrestling. Without the guaranteed programming, WCW couldn't exist. Bischoff made a last-ditch effort to try and strike a deal with FOX to get on the FX network, but literally had less than two weeks or the company would be closed and McMahon would buy the assets, intellectual property and valuable tape library for a bargain basement price of \$2.5 million. Bischoff knew deals like that simply couldn't close in a big corporate structure like FOX in two weeks, and was a beaten man mentally after all the things that had gone bad after he presumed he would be getting the company, eliminating the excess baggage, and getting a fresh start.

As noted, as much as I wanted the company to survive because I thought it would be disastrous for wrestling if it didn't, again, even if things had gone differently, my gut was still WCW was doomed. The history of the people running Fusient, who made their big name and money by creating a sports classics network idea, getting it off the ground, and selling it to ESPN, was more to stabilize the company and then sell it at a profit. Bischoff was looking at trying to take the company public, like McMahon had done to become incredibly wealthy. But so much damage had been done to the brand over the prior two years that it was going to be a major uphill fight.

The story of Bischoff getting into power came in 1993 shortly after Watts was gone. Several people were gunning to run the company, including Tony Schiavone. Bischoff seemed to have the least experience, but also the most personal charisma. At the time, I recall he was considered the least likely to get the job out of several candidates, yet I also expected him to get it, for a funny reason. He seemed to have the least experience and knowledge of wrestling, but he had experience selling television shows, and TBS seemed to favor having people outside of wrestling run the wrestling company.

In the online interview, JBL made fun of Bischoff for firing Steve Austin and hiring a no-talent like Lex Luger. Bischoff said Luger made \$500,000 when he left WCW the first time (correct figure). He said he went to WWF to improve himself. In actuality, Vince McMahon offered him less money, \$350,000, but he would work in his bodybuilding company. He could stay home, train, appeared on a television show that nobody watched, and took no bumps and had no road expenses. After that company folded, he was brought back as "The Narcissist," because Vince wanted to create a new character. That flopped. Then he turned him face after Hogan quit and tried to make him the new Hogan. That didn't work, but part of the reason was there was a specific time to pull the trigger and make him champion, and they didn't. The company plan was to build for a title change at Wrestlemania. Even though he didn't have the look the company favored, Bret Hart, who had been champion earlier, was more popular and after he and Luger tied in the Royal Rumble, and the fans that night clearly got behind Hart more than Luger, the plans were changed. Unhappy being put in a tag team with Davey Boy Smith, Luger found a contract breach, and his showing up on the first Nitro was a huge deal. JBL saying Luger never drew a dime is kind of funny. Luger never did what was expected of him to do. Everyone in wrestling hated him, thought he was aloof, had everything handed to him, and he was not the next Hogan. He wasn't a particularly hard worker, although he was good athlete and obviously had the look to draw money. But he didn't connect with the public. But when Luger headlined in WWF, he outdrew what JBL did when he was the headliner in his big run. As far as Bischoff firing Austin, while it looks like the worst business decision in history today, at the time it was viewed as stupid as hell.

Nobody knew Austin would turn out to be what he was. But everyone knew he was main event talent being buried in WCW. I always saw him as Ted DiBiase. Not the super draw, but the guy who worked with the super draw and made him look better than he was. He had the look and talent, had not developed his promos, and raised the ire of management by being injured a few times and holding up a TV taping by refusing to put over the talentless Renegade once (as much as management hated him over that, he was something of a locker room hero for doing it, because the feeling that Hogan-brought in Ultimate Warrior copy beating one of the best workers in the company epitomized the frustration much of the roster felt).

JBL also said that even when they were losing, that they felt they would win because they had the better wrestling product, which was what people in WWF

thought, with Bret Hart, Shawn Michaels, Austin by that time, (both talked about Rock, but by the time Rock really hit his stride, WWF was solidly ahead) as compared to Hogan, Hall and Nash, fans would choose the better product. That's funny, because in the 80s, in the Crockett/McMahon war, that was the Crockett battle cry. Match quality doesn't mean a thing compared to having over personalities and good stories when it comes to winning a wrestling war. Good matches are better than bad matches. And the truth was, on the whole, WCW provided better wrestling—often great undercards and crappy main events. WWF had better main events, but the undercard couldn't even compare. Generally speaking, when WCW was beating WWF in the ratings, Nitro had far better wrestling than Raw. That's not the main reason it was winning, but it had bigger name personalities on top and good storylines at first that turned the corner.

Bischoff agreed that Rock probably gave better matches than Hogan or Nash, but noted headlining shows is more than just match quality, which is the understatement of the century. It's funny, because the strong undercards, which was one of the major feathers Nitro had over Raw, was so insignificant to Bischoff, that he doesn't even remember it, just as all those new young guys who could have changed the business, like a younger Rey Mysterio, could have incredible matches, and even consistently move ratings, but it wouldn't matter. Bischoff catered to the stars, and only considered certain people stars.

Good, bad and indifferent, those were my views of Bischoff as the guy who ran WCW. And today, they still are.

Eric Bischoff is a number of things. My feeling is he's a great salesman. What he accomplished on the front end with WCW, taking the company from \$24 million in revenue in 1993 to almost \$225 million in 1998 is a level of exploding growth that really only Vince McMahon and Dana White have done in the modern history of the industry. He made many great moves, and as many bad moves. As impressive as the ascent was, the decline in 1999 was even more spectacular, a product self destruction the likes of which there is simply no comparison.

He was a great TV performer, although WWE never allowed him to get the heat that could have made him for more valuable there than he was. Even those who hate him in the company recognize they could have done far more with the character on television, but the feeling is he was there both because he was good, and because the constant humiliation was constant retribution by McMahon. In the book, even Ric Flair, who had a horrible relationship with him in WCW with the lawsuit and character burial, and punched Bischoff out in a backstage situation that was set up to leave the two alone for enough time before it would be broken up, was treated with kid gloves. And no, Bischoff never acknowledges the backstage step-up on him ever happened and acts as though he and Flair are friends. Bischoff was hated enough in the company that the situation that in almost any other case the wrestlers would view it as completely unprofessional and management would consider it terms for firing. Instead, it made Flair a locker room hero for a time and Flair was not even punished by McMahon. But it's also been many years and even Bischoff's enemies have to acknowledge his performance ability, and a few quick calls this week told me those who hated him largely still do, but nobody is going to be unprofessional with him.

Obviously, for someone who was a gigantic source of information for me for years and who would even claim that he always made sure I got the right information before anyone else (no doubt while telling everyone else the same thing), to portray negatively wrestlers or others in the company who "leaked" information, using that derogatory term, mentioning my name specifically and not mentioning that fact is disingenuous at best. His book should have been the most interesting book written on wrestling because he had a perspective looking back on things that went wrong and right, and was in a position that really only a few people understood. I mean, I could talk with many different people directly involved, and write about it weekly, and I lived the business, but my job was to write about the results, ratings, box office, show quality, future direction. I could understand what was happening, why, and momentum shifts, but not external politics and pressures on why all these stupid decisions were being made. And if you are wondering as far as the creative decisions that were the source of nothing but comedy, there is not even a clue as to why they happened. As WCW was going down fast in 1999, Tuesday after a horrible television consisted of Hogan's people calling to blame Nash and say that Hogan was just doing his job as a character, Nash telling his friends he was the booker but had no real power because of Bischoff and Hogan, and Bischoff saying that Nash was the booker. There was no insight whatsoever to that dynamic, and the fall was explained by blaming corporate suits in Turner, who had nothing to do with the scripting of the nonsensical and destructive television that saw fans leave in droves.

Over the years, I've been offered to write many of the biggest stars' autobiographies (obviously none in WWE). Many I'd have loved to have done, but doing this newsletter makes it impossible from a time standpoint to do outside projects. For the those reasons, along with the even more obvious political reasons, I couldn't have done this one, but when it was over, forgetting about the "dirtsheet"

knocks, I almost wished I could have, just because the book could have been so much better. Granted, there was a ton he avoided in his personal life, but I saw it more as a the opportunity for a great business book anyway. I don't know how he could frame the Gold Club scandal (Bischoff took home his wife and a stripper and allegedly watched the two do it, which came out publicly as he was subpoenaed in a case that got a lot of publicity) or the multitude of lawsuits against him and WCW that had to be settled. These ranged from everyone ranging from wrestlers, WWF, ECW, Missy Hyatt (who he ripped on and then failed to mention that afterwards she also collected a huge settlement from the company) and even at one point the company had to settle an action with newsletter writer Bruce Mitchell because of Bischoff talking before thinking. The decision was to ignore that they happened in most cases, and blame them on Turner lawyers who always caved when sued. There probably is something to that, but in many cases, it was Bischoff's actions who put them in a position where they had little choice.

But he seemed to have nobody jarring his memory past anything "surface" on so many of the stories that could have made it even more interesting. And there was nobody with enough sophistication to see at least the obvious places where his memory failed him.

He did get into his philosophy of what wrestling should be, which was at least interesting and you can learn from it, because at least at one point in history, it did work well. It may have lacked depth and it didn't stand the test of time. Aspects of it would work again today and it only stopped working not because his ideas of what the product should be were flawed but because the product given to the public was so bad. He completely whitewashed the decline of the company, not mentioning the company produced some of the most unwatchable television, house shows and PPV shows imaginable. They had more talent than any wrestling company in history, both star power wise and in-ring wise, and collapsed under horrible booking. There was no insight to that, and in 2000 and 2001, he talked to me greatly about what went wrong and why, and gave the impression he had learned a lot of what not to do in hindsight, none of which came across here. Of course he always blamed outside forces even then, and when you go down as fast as WCW did, you can't point to one person or one thing or one decision as to why.

Many have simplified the death into Bischoff's fault, Russo's fault, Jamie Kellner's fault, guaranteed contracts, bad booking, selfish talent on top, or a single booking decision like beating Goldberg, or the subsequent the one finger touch title change. All were part of the reason, but the real reason was a combination of all of them, and plenty more.

Standards & Practices didn't force them to produce horrible television. A Turner higher-up who told him he couldn't tell a Monica Lewinsky joke on Nitro may have been too sensitive, but that had absolutely nothing to do with the product decline. In fact, the result of that, banning Bischoff from doing his "Tonight Show" monologues, were a benefit, because that was some of the worst stuff ever, and a rare occasion in that era where an unopposed quarter saw the audience tune out in droves. The truth is, as many of the things the higher-ups stopped were money and ratings losers by people in charge who booked with themselves in mind and with no thought at all as to what the viewing audience wanted, or when the numbers showed the direction wasn't working, seemed to even acknowledge the lessons told or even cared how the audience had reacted.

In fact, when wrestling was at its apex, it became so mainstream that producing sleazy television with so many kids watching was no longer under the radar. Long before it became a major news story, Bischoff was the first person to predict, months ahead of time, the eventual advertiser pullouts that happened to both companies. And in late 1999, when those pullouts forced WWF, which did get very sleazy and edgy and that was part of the reason they took the lead (but the main one was they were simply producing a far better product) to tone down, unlike WCW, WWF responded by having an even stronger year the next year. Bischoff complaining they lost because they weren't allowed to do things WWF did, actually citing the night Mae Young gave birth to a hand as an example, is simply not a valid excuse.

The one joke that used to be made about Bischoff from many people, and I know this one first hand, was regarding his memory. People would talk about pitching Bischoff an idea, and a week later, he would tell you about his new idea, doing a great enthusiastic pitch for it. He would not even remember that he was enthusiastically putting it over to the person who gave him the idea in the first place. Every great promoter surrounds himself with idea people, and you learn from them, hopefully nix the bad ones and use the good ones. In the world, that's really the only way to learn and evolve. I think a lot of the book's problems were not based on deception, but simply not remembering details.

But not all.

The first red flag reading the book was on page 4, when Bischoff noted that he turned WCW from a \$24 million a year company to a \$350 million company. Considering on several occasions I heard the 24 to 225 speech (and both figures were documented to me on paper from internal sources with a year-end profit/loss ledger), and he said it numerous times in media interviews, I don't buy

this one as a memory lapse. In 1998, a \$225 million year was beyond incredible, significantly beating anything any company in history had ever done. The WWF's fiscal year was slightly different, May to April. It started really turning things around in late 1997 as far as being profitable, and had the first \$200 million year in company history in 1998-99, at \$251 million.

But with WWE, while not nearly as hot with the American public as it was in those days, due to so many new revenue opportunities opening up, more money in TV rights fees, DVDs, international, etc., they still took in \$400 million last year. In other words, \$225 million doesn't sound nearly so impressive today.

What many fail to realize is that before Nitro, the entire business was in the doldrums. WWF was clearly No. 1, but they were losing big money, and unlike today, were not the kind of a public company with huge cash reserves to where it didn't hurt badly. They had to take out some major loans, greatly cut salaries in management and cut way back on expenses, just to keep running before they start turning a profit. WCW's fan base was at an embarrassing level. TV stations didn't pay big money for wrestling, even when it pulled great ratings. Had it not been for Turner himself, that rival brand of pro wrestling would have been dead by 1989.

It's impossible to speculate on what would have happened if Ted Turner had not made the decision to put Nitro up against Raw. Contrary to popular belief, Bischoff never asked to go head-to-head. Nitro on Monday nights at 9 p.m. came because Turner asked Bischoff why WCW Saturday Night wasn't doing the ratings Raw was, and Bischoff said it was because Raw was in prime time. Turner then decreed that TNT, his new star network, would then put wrestling at the same time as Raw. It shocked the entire business into changing everything about itself, which led to a gigantic popularity growth that would not have happened otherwise.

Bischoff acknowledged some talent was overpaid, which was a reason it was hard to turn around the losses, but he said that it was not the primary reason why the company failed, saying he was sick of hearing WCW died because talent was overpaid. WCW as a business died because nobody was buying tickets and PPVs, and contract figures that were not overpaying given the high company profit levels, didn't help matters. But if every wrestler in the company in 2000 worked for nothing, the company was still going to have lost big money due to a lack of interest.

Bischoff's first live encounter with pro wrestling was as a high school senior in Minneapolis, when he called Wally Karbo to ask if he could go on television to try and raise interest in an international wrestling match. Verne Gagne, who owned the AWA, as a former amateur wrestling legend, had a soft spot in his heart when it came to promoting the real sport. Years later, he sold Gagne on the idea of a Ninja Star Wars game to sell on his TV shows, and parlayed that into a sales job with the AWA. Once, on a promo day, announcer Larry Nelson was in jail, and they needed someone to play announcer for a day. Bischoff was in the office and had a tie and sports coat and they put him in front of the camera. He became an on-air voice of the company. Things got so bad for the AWA that Bischoff worked for a long time without getting paid, forcing him into bankruptcy. Eventually, he got a job with WCW as a "C" team announcer and moved to Atlanta. Bischoff's take on WCW was the announcers had heavy southern accents that worked in the South but didn't play well in the rest of the country. For some reason, that was an issue in wrestling that followed Jim Ross around, even though many of the biggest name and most successful national sportscasters also had regional accents and nobody took them off their sports with the idea it made the sport regional. Today, with John Layfield and Jim Ross, you have two WWE announcers with obvious accents and nobody would blame any lack of national appeal on that. In fact, later in the book he praised Ross, who was the most obvious person he was referring to as an announcer with a Southern accent that was regionalizing the appeal of the product, as one of the best announcers in the business.

The book takes you through the end of the Jim Herd tenure, and focuses on the failure of the Bill Watts tenure. He was very negative on Watts. Always has been. Most in the company were at the time. But his descriptions of many of the problems were fair.

However, he stated the WCW audience tended to be old, due to the traditional style of wrestling and younger viewers had left in droves to go to WWF. In actuality, one of the great myths of wrestling is that of ratings and wrestling being mainstream and such.

The biggest pro wrestling ratings in history, by leaps and bounds, were done by successful regional promotions in their territory. Jerry Jarrett's wrestling in Memphis on Saturday mornings drew more viewers in the late 70s and early 80s than any show in the market except for the top two or three network shows of the time. They often topped a 20 rating and 70 share. To this day, Memphis has been the best television market in the country largely due to a tradition not brought on by any national group, but from Jarrett. Mid South, Dallas, AWA and Mid Atlantic wrestling had markets before the national boom where they did incredible numbers. I used to laugh when I'd hear stories about Jim Cornette telling people like Kevin Dunn the ratings wrestling did that wasn't WWF. The response was that now

wrestling draws a mainstream and family audience, and Cornette said that a 20 rating would seem to indicate wrestling was mainstream and somebody's family must be watching. Earlier than that, Sam Muchnick's "Wrestling at the Chase," when on Sundays duced the NFL equally. Comparing pure numbers is unfair, because in those days there were only a handful of TV stations. But saying how wrestling did head-to-head against the NFL is as valid a comparison in 1966 as 2006. This isn't to minimize what was impressively accomplished, but to point out when you do a 13 rating or a 20 rating, even when there may be only seven stations in the market, your popularity is pretty mainstream.

In 1981, Georgia Championship Wrestling on cable averaged a 6.4 rating for the year. In 1985, Mid South Wrestling on TBS for a 13-week run in a bad Sunday night time slot averaged a 5.3 rating. In both cases, those shows were the highest rated shows on cable. WWF and whomever had the TBS contract routinely did good ratings, and at times were also the highest rated shows on cable, and regularly in the top ten. The actual highest cable ratings in history for wrestling were in 1984-85 for two WWF MTV specials that topped 9's, although fewer people had cable in those days. For overall viewers no time came close to the "wars." In no way can you compare those numbers directly with a similar number today, but wrestling viewership in many places and at many times was far more mainstream than later history gives it credit for being.

In 1992, ratings for WCW and WWF on cable were almost identical (WCW averaged a 2.17 for its cable package of several different weekly shows, WWF averaged a 2.15). WWF had stronger syndication, drew far more fans, and its PPVs were more popular because they were far better at getting their viewers into spending money for the product. Plus, they still had Hulk Hogan, whose importance in selling tickets and PPV buys can't be overemphasized. The only age group WWF clearly beat WCW as far as TV ratings even during the Jim Herd era was with kids. This is why WCW pushed Sting so hard and tried to portray the "Little Stingers" myth to combat the reality of "Hulkamaniacs." Many of the WCW and WWF viewers were likely the same people, although each group also had their own unique fan base. Many fans of one promotion despised the other. But the majority of the fans willing to spend money to support the product were doing so on WWF. WCW's television popularity was probably more regionally based due to the tradition of where the company evolved from (there are no stats to back that up other than TBS itself was more popular in the South at the time).

By 1992, they weren't drawing well in their traditional regions either. Many of WCW's problems in the early years were based on the attempt to compete for the kids audience, which never succeeded, but led to a product that really no audience in great numbers was interested in paying for. While eventually with the introduction of Raw in 1993, it became the most popular show on cable, WCW still drew more viewers for its programming on cable than WWF almost every year until the collapse. Eric Bischoff was the first promoter who beat Vince McMahon head-to-head on PPV. He never fully beat McMahon for a full year period in house shows, but the gap was closer and numbers were ridiculously high for both companies during the 1998 peak. Many promoters beat McMahon's numbers regionally in the early days, and generally speaking, national numbers were always competitive. Vince's concentration at the time was on where he made money, which in those days was on presentation of the live events, and in merchandising, which is based on creating superstars.

When talking about Watts being booted out of WCW, he stated Watts gave an interview with Mark Madden at the *Pro Wrestling Torch* where he made remarks that as an owner of a business, he believed at the time (Watts does not believe so now) that he should have the right to discriminate, including based on race. It was more theoretical owners' rights as opposed to advocating racism. The irony is that Watts' track record as a promoter was something of a champion as a promoter for black men being used on top, although that wasn't because he was a race relations champion as much as he simply thought those were the right moves for his business. The interview was actually done with Wade Keller, not Madden, right at the time Watts was first hired. I remember hearing the interview when it was done and thinking when it was printed, there is no way Watts was going to be able to survive it. But in fact, it was printed, and nothing was ever said. Nearly a year later, when tension between Watts and management was already at a nearly breakable point, it was Madden who faxed it the interview to Hank Aaron, a baseball legend who faced racism his whole life, for comments for a story. Aaron was infuriated by it and the fallout led to Watts quitting and being fired at about the same time. If Madden hadn't have contacted Aaron, who had publicly at about the same time come out against Cincinnati Reds owner Marge Schott for making statements that played publicly the same way, that got her removed from baseball, Phil Mushnick was going to within days. It was a potential crossover sports story in that Aaron, a bigwig in the Turner organization, had been in the front lines of the Schott fight, and all of a sudden the Turner organization had someone heading one of its brands whose remarks came across equally as bad.

*We will have part two of the story of WCW and Eric Bischoff next week.*

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*  
Part two of our history of World Championship Wrestling and Eric Bischoff's book 'Controversy Creates Cash,' covers a lot of major stories from the WCW years and how Bischoff remembers them, as well as more details on what both is and isn't true about them.

Probably the worst memory incident is one of the stories he's publicly on WWE television attempted to sell the book based on. The commercials and hype for the book was great, but if you're looking at Bischoff speaking out against people he had heat with in the past like Vince McMahon, Ric Flair or anyone who could possibly affect his career negatively, you'll be disappointed.

Bischoff promised to tell the real story of why Jim Ross was fired from WCW, and said it was not the story Ross has been saying all these years. Bischoff said he never fired Ross, and that it was Ross who wanted out. Ross was the vice president of wrestling operations, as well as lead announcer, for WCW, in 1992, working under Watts. Watts was Ross' business mentor and the two are to this day still close friends. Bischoff says, what was true, that in the Watts fallout, Ross being so closely tied to Watts led to him being removed from power. Bischoff said he didn't like working for Ross, calling him a miserable human being, but somewhat sympathized with his own plight having to hand out Watts' marching orders. He said he respected Ross' work ethic. Bischoff said Bill Shaw moved Ross into the syndication department and then Bischoff was hired as executive producer. He said Ross then contacted Vince McMahon, who agreed to hire him, and Bischoff, rather than having an unhappy employee, agreed to let him out of his contract.

First off, Bischoff's big revelation that he never fired Ross is hardly groundbreaking. I (Ross) ever claimed he was fired by Bischoff, in the last 13 years, I sure never heard it, and nobody reputable ever reported it. Ross' 1993 departure from WCW was a huge story at the time because of how it went down. The actual story is that Ross was under contract with his job description specified as being the lead announcer on WCW Saturday Night. He had a few years left on the contract when he was reassigned and taken off announcing.

I recall that during that period, I totally understood his connection with Watts would lead to his removal from power. That was an inevitable part of changes in hierarchy. But the decision was also made to take him off as lead announcer. Even if Tony Schiavone had been put in his lead spot (and TBS management had years earlier picked Ross ahead of Schiavone, which had caused Schiavone to leave for WWF), WCW had so many different shows that removing Ross completely made no sense at the time. Again, if they suddenly hired some good announcers it would be one thing. Whether the actual call to remove him as announcer came from Bischoff or Bill Shaw, Shaw was the one who publicly was given 'credit' for the decision. Ross' attorney believed that constituted a contract breach, even though the company was going to pay him his salary for the remainder of the deal. He told McMahon about the breach, and McMahon offered him a job. Both kept it a secret. A few people in WCW knew Ross was probably leaving the company, but believed he was going to get out of wrestling to take a radio talk show job in Tulsa. There are very few major things that were a shock to me when they happened, like the Kurt Angle thing, but one of those was the night when Ross introduced Vince McMahon as his guest on his WCW-sponsored radio talk show on WSB in Atlanta that he was not yet removed from. On that show, McMahon noted Ross would start with WWF by announcing the upcoming 1993 *Wrestlemania* in Las Vegas. Nobody from WCW was aware this was going to happen, or that he'd been talking with McMahon. The company was absolutely livid they got blindsided and shown up on what was essentially their own show. McMahon and Ross must have loved it. But with such a public move, it would be impossible for Ross to ever claim he was fired.

Bischoff didn't remember any of that, even though it was a huge deal in wrestling at the time. Instead, he wrote: "But Jim got himself over by claiming that I fired him, and that WCW was being run by a bunch of unqualified idiots. Jim would run around and say in his good-old-boy drawl, 'I got fired because of that damn Eric Bischoff.' Problem is, none of that is true. Years later, after Ross suffered his first bout of Bell's Palsy, and McMahon fired him, Ross was out of work tried and tried to get back into WCW, and Bischoff wouldn't give him the time of day."

Bischoff then claimed a group of Cub Scouts would have done a better job of running WCW than Watts. Ratings and house show numbers were actually slightly better under Kip Frey (who I considered an honest guy who really wanted to learn and he listened to fans a lot, but he had less wrestling knowledge than even Jim Herd), who preceded Watts. And he knew nothing about wrestling while Watts had three decades in the business. But Watts was brought in primarily to lower the losses, and came closer to breaking even than anyone before Bischoff.

Bischoff claimed his idea of Disney tapings as a huge success. He categorized WCW tapings as drawing "miserable looking crowds, half of whom were winos with a bottle of cheap wine in paper bags on their laps, or no crowd at all." He claimed the live crowds were dead, and the shows looked dull and tired. Crowds were terrible in 1993. WCW averaged less than 1,000 paid per live event. But WCW always drew more enthusiastic fans because Southern fans responded more to wrestling moves and match quality, while WWF fans generally responded more to star power, signature spots and musical ring entrances. Don't get me wrong. WWF did come across as clearly more major league, although business for both companies was pretty bad at the time.

Bischoff then moved syndication to Disney. Instead of taping at a medium sized arena like the tired looking Cobb County Civic Center in Marietta, they moved to MGM Disney in Orlando before a few hundred people, mostly tourists, who would be directed with signs to cheer and boo like at a television game show. There were positives and minuses of the move. You got more kids and families at the show, who weren't fans, so you got a more controlled reaction. There was no passion in the crowd, but there was constant noise. The place, though smaller, looked much better. The negative was, they would go down for several days and tape several months worth of shows. They had to come up with several months worth of plans before doing a taping. You would find out title changes because if it was taped in April, but airing in July, and a belt change was scheduled for June on PPV or at a Clash of Champions, you'd see the new champ coming to the ring with his belt. A lot of people overreacted in the sense it exposed the business. I never worried about exposing the business because I felt most of the paying audience knew, although nobody wanted to get their face slapped with it while attending a show. But the internet barely existed, and newsletters only reached fans who largely understood, so of the people who attended live shows and watched on television, the fact they were doing this really only hit a tiny percentage. It was more comedic than bad business.

But the problem with those tapings is—plans change. People get hurt. Angles don't work. People change their looks. Angles get dropped. People leave for WWF when their contracts are up, or just get fed up and head home after a blow-up with management. Newcomers brought in wouldn't appear on the syndicated show for months. After the first few weeks aired, in most cases, most of the matches and angles in syndication no longer had relevance to what was being done at house shows, WCW Saturday Night (the flagship show) and PPVs. In those days, one of the primary goals of the syndication package was to promote the local house show, and clearly when your TV angles had nothing to do with the live show, the effectiveness at that role becomes very limited. In short, syndication did absolutely nothing to sell the product. Bischoff portrayed the tapings as a huge success. In hindsight people involved with production and then getting on the air, some of whom are not negative overall on Bischoff, believe they were useless and a failure. To me, they were just filling time commitments. Syndicated ratings dropped because fans didn't care about watching shows with no storyline relevance to what was taking place. But from an advertiser standpoint, as well as a television programming standpoint, the shows did look better. The ability to sell the package to local program directors likely would have improved although I don't recall any improvements in the syndication levels at that time that would bear out that theory. But however you want to argue, it was not a big deal in the long run. Syndication was becoming more and more a thing of the past and cable was taking over as the primary television outlet, anyway.

The main shows were the Saturday night tapings at Center Stage in Atlanta, a 700-seat theater where fans were let in for free. WCW couldn't even fill the place for free, even with taking out ads on local radio, and the higher-ups were embarrassed at the dress and look of the fans. Nobody would say it publicly, particularly in a Turner company, but there were issues of a building filled with Blacks, particularly kids. So they hired models, to dress up in front in the center, often passed out signs, to give the impression to viewers that the beautiful people were into the product. But the look of the crowd on the Saturday Night show didn't make people think WCW was cool either.

"Disney had an immediate positive impact on the product, and on WCW. There was more buzz, better shows and more interest from national advertisers." I don't know about advertisers, as it is possible the Disney connection could have made a difference with some, although people who were there at the time don't remember that happening. The shows were different. At first the atmosphere was better, but with it being detached from storylines, there were negatives. The wrestlers were positive and negative on them. They could bring their families to Orlando for a vacation. But with "fake" crowd reactions to "cheer" and "boo" cards made it feel like a game show and not wrestling, and for the younger wrestlers who were being heavily featured, they couldn't learn how to work because the artificial crowd reactions stymied their learning. It contributed no public buzz whatsoever to the product. Bischoff went on-and-on about what a great idea it was, and I don't think it was a big failure or anything, but it really in

hindsight meant nothing. Eventually, having been burned so often on storylines in syndication being obsolete, they taped fewer and fewer angles. The show would feature months old matches spliced in with current angles. If someone got a haircut, got on a steroid cycle, or whatever, they would look completely different in their angle and match on the same show. Often, because injuries caused booking changes, someone would have held a title in the updated part of the syndicated show while someone else would have the same belt in the months earlier taped matches.

He claimed in the end, they were such a big success that even those opposed to them would later claim they were in favor of them. The people who thought by giving away title changes in advance they would kill the business probably eventually realized that wasn't the case. If they were such an overwhelming success, the fact is they were only done for a short period of time before they were discontinued. Nobody even talks about the Disney tapings today except when comparing the TNA look to those tapings. In that context, that is usually meant as a negative remark on TNA.

Time heals a lot of wounds. In the book, Bischoff and Flair were buddies. And at first, they were. Flair always claimed he helped get Bischoff the job, and was the key person in convincing Hulk Hogan to come in.

Bischoff described Hogan coming in as him having left wrestling in 1993 after a falling out with Vince McMahon, and claiming Hogan told people he was done with wrestling. It would have been difficult for him to have been telling people he was done with wrestling in late 1993 and early 1994. He was both appearing on big shows for New Japan Pro Wrestling, and he and Jimmy Hart were rounding people up to start a new promotion that Hogan claimed he would run and bankroll. Now whether Hogan would actually pull the trigger on that or not is speculation. Considering Hogan's past of talking about doing a promotion and never doing it, makes me think he was more likely trying to get the word out that he would as a way to get back with WWF after "Thunder in Paradise" ran its course. But Hart was working his ass off lining people up. Despite all the talk in wrestling at the time about it, I was always skeptical.

Hart assured his people and the wrestlers he had lined up that when Hogan started talking with WCW that he'd never go there, but Bischoff in the end made the deal. And a number of the guys Hart had lined up were brought into WCW through their connection with Hogan.

Bischoff described how he and Flair would travel over and over to meet with Hogan, to agree on the booking scenarios since Hogan's first program would be the "dream program" with Flair.

It was portrayed on television at the time as if the matches with the two biggest stars of that era had never been done before. Of course, they had worked many times in late 1991 and early 1992 in WWF. But both promotions had little problem ignoring history, in building matches..

Bischoff noted Hogan didn't really move ratings, that Vince's audience didn't come over to see Hogan because they were tired of him and the steroid controversy followed him. I don't know why Hogan didn't move ratings, but they were disappointed, figuring he'd bring in that elusive kids market they could never capture. But for a PPV show, he was strong enough to almost single-handedly turn around the balance of power, and make the game a lot closer.

"Of course the only thing the dirtsheet 'experts' talked about were television ratings. They didn't get it."

It was evident from the first Hogan-Flair match buy rate that at least at the start, for business, signing Hogan was even more of a success than expected. That was the truth and that's how it was covered. Whether it would last past the dream series with Flair was still in question, although a program with Vader was another dream match situation at the time at the time seemed to have success written all over it. In 1994, the focus was on PPV buy rates as the most important thing, followed by arena attendance. Nobody at that time cared much about television ratings other than if they showed a sustained peak or valley, or the ratings of the Clash of Champions because the people at Turner put so much emphasis on those numbers.

"Dirtsheet" of course is an industry term for newsletters. I don't know who came up with the term first, although most point to Zane Bresloff, who is probably the most interesting character never talked about in Bischoff's book. Bresloff was a long-time rock and roll promoter who got mired in some form of a scandal and a governmental investigation in that world, and had to get out of that business. The music industry had insider publications that were called the dirtsheets, and unlike people in wrestling who were used to operating in secrecy, he came from music where everyone in the know openly read them (as opposed to secretly as in wrestling at the time). He ended up promoting most of the old "AWA" cities for Vince McMahon dating back to the early days of the expansion, and then as he was successful, got much of the Western part of the country (pretty much everything except Northern California) and promoted the arena event for three Wrestlemanias.

Bresloff gained a reputation for being a good wrestling promoter, as he

was a huge fan growing up in Chicago and used what he knew in promoting concerts and what he understood as a wrestling fan. He had tons of radio connections from his music days, and was an obsessive worker. Wrestling promotion had largely been based on hyping the live event through the local syndicated television show, selling tickets, and coming in. Bresloff promoted shows the same way he had done rock & roll shows, heavily relying on the hot local radio stations in the market, with ticket contests and ticket giveaways. Later, with WCW, he came up with the idea that changed local event promoting the most, the idea of a hyped on-sale date that would be made into an event of itself.

With the house show business in shambles after the disastrous 1993, Bill Shaw and Bob Dhue lured Bresloff from WWF. WCW averaged 560 fans paid per event in the final four months of 1993. Bresloff was tight with most of the WWF talent that was on top during the 80s, when Saturday Night's Main Event gave the stars a mainstream presence like really nothing has done since. He was particularly tight with Hogan.

Bresloff took over at the start of 1994, running the house show division. In the first four months of 1994, that increased to 1,600. It was still terrible, but a whole lot better degree of terrible. Bresloff being in WCW was not what brought Hogan to the company. The fact he was there made Hogan far more comfortable about being there.

Those close to both Bresloff and Bischoff estimated 80% of Bischoff's innovative promotional ideas came from Bresloff.

Being that Bresloff would pitch most of his promotional ideas to me for a yay or nay before going to Bischoff with them, I would say when it comes to ideas for promotion of live events, that percentage is accurate. He had no real influence on booking that I could tell, even though he did come up with occasional suggestions there. But Nitro parties, non-arena locations for shows, special on-sale first day promotions to get advances off strong, where to place advertising, booking college campuses and doing activities on campus, all ideas that made Nitro cool to that age group, those all came from Bresloff.

The first Hogan/Flair chasm took place in their second "national" match in 1994. The plan was to do a three-bout series. Hogan would win the title in his debut. Flair would win the title back in a television rematch on the Clash of the Champions. And Hogan would win the rubber match, probably leading to Hogan vs. Vader. Match No. 2, on August 28, 1994, in Cedar Rapids, IA, drew a 4.5 rating, a huge success since the prior Clash with Flair vs. Sting did a disappointing 3.0 (the shows the previous year ranged from a 2.6 to 3.8). One of the biggest non-Super Bowl sports audiences in history was drawn that year by a figure skating drama involving Tonya Harding's husband hiring people to take out the knee of Nancy Kerrigan, which became a gigantic news story the likes of which could probably never even happen today since the public is so desensitized. It was basically a Dusty Rhodes style pro wrestling angle come to life, but real, and culminating in the Olympic games. Copying this angle, Flair's henchmen used a wrench to take out Hogan's knee, but Hogan still came back to defend his title. It was a takeoff also of an angle Rhodes had done in losing the NWA title in a one week Florida reign back to Harley Race, when Terry Funk took out his knee before the match.

But even though the scenario was there for Hogan to lose the title, likely get over more, and to set up the rubber match where Hogan was going to win and move on to Vader, Hogan invoked his creative control card. He agreed to lose via count out, but not the title. Flair felt double-crossed. Bischoff wrote, "I don't think that any of us seriously considered taking the title off Hogan that quickly." He said it went against all long-term planning to switch the belt back and to beat Hogan in his second big match after he gets there. An argument can be made for that, but he failed to mention the reason Flair was upset was because the whole program was laid out and agreed to ahead of time.

Worse, because Flair didn't win the title even with it basically handed to him in match No. 2, when the advance in Detroit for match No. 3 got off slow, the company panicked, felt there was no buzz, and tried to save the PPV by making it a retirement match between the two biggest stars of the prior ten years. Flair wanted a contract extension in exchange for losing, and wasn't happy about having to take several months off to sell the stipulation. In those days, where fans expected stipulations to be honored, the fact Flair was obviously not retiring was considered false advertising. Today, nobody would take it seriously, it wouldn't draw any extra money as this stip at that time was designed to do, and today nobody would expect Flair in losing not to come back quickly. In 1994, most likely, the stipulation saved the buy rate, although a paid attendance of 8,595 for a show where either Hogan or Flair was advertised to retire could in no way be considered a success.

Flair got the extension, but the trust factor was broken. Bischoff remembered it, noting other guys tried to hold him up for a deal and he booted them out, but he didn't do it with Flair.

When discussing the actual conversation in 1995 that led to Nitro, he portrayed it as Turner giving them two hours on Monday night. It's a minor point, but Nitro was a one-hour show head-to-head with Raw, also one hour. Nitro and

Raw were going back-and-forth, and in May of 1996, to give Nitro a one hour jump in start to hook the audience, the show moved to two hours.

In his portrayal of the Lex Luger jump and his shocking arrival at the first Nitro, and again, like the prior point, this was also likely simply bad memory, he said Luger's contract expired at midnight the day before the first Nitro. In actuality, Luger's WWF contract had some time to go, but like with Jim Ross, Luger's lawyer found a breach. He started talking to WCW. Bischoff portrayed this as a huge secret. It was and it wasn't. The Observer reported weeks before that WCW and Luger were talking. It was somewhat known within WCW. WWF was also aware of it, since Luger's attorney pointed out his feeling on a breach and they were aware he had done so to open talks with the opposition and felt there was a chance he could be leaving. Maybe a week later, Luger assured WWF he didn't make the deal and was staying.

After he showed up on Nitro, McMahon was furious, saying Luger still had plenty of time left in his contract, but said that he was going to see him in court. Evidently, Luger's attorney's breach was valid because in the end, McMahon never sued, but seemingly held a grudge for many years. When WCW folded, McMahon took great glee in firing Luger on the air. When Luger's girlfriend, Miss Elizabeth, died of an overdose, McMahon put a series of segments on Elizabeth's death on Smackdown and Confidential, and even though knowing better, gave the impression that Luger may have killed her. Since more people saw those segments nationally than read the actual media stories, which only really ran in the Atlanta area, to this day many people believe Luger somehow killed his fiancé.

Luger worked the Sunday night house show in Canada for WWF before secretly flying to Minneapolis for the first Nitro, and then walked out during the show. Many point to that moment as the one that made Nitro, which went unopposed the first week on purpose as Bischoff was smart enough to schedule the debut on a night Raw was preempted for the U.S. Open. This built to a Hogan vs. Luger first-time ever match the next week, and Nitro beat Raw 2.5 to 2.2.

Bischoff stated his contentious relationship with dirtsheet writers dated back to this time. It is true that I, and everyone, thought going head-to-head would split audiences and be bad for everyone. Vince McMahon did and complained about it vehemently, claiming it proved Turner was interested in hurting him more than building up his own product. It's an amazing irony how it all turned out. I can't come up with one person at the time who felt it was a positive for the industry, although Bischoff ended smelling like a rose very quickly. I also thought WCW bucking the established Raw was a mistake. The contentious relationship story, particularly once Nitro started, was an interesting work.

Bischoff put on a loaded first show, with Jushin Liger vs. Brian Pillman, Ric Flair vs. Sting and Hulk Hogan vs. Big Bubba Rogers (Big Bossman) for the title. Raw would have main event matches, but never a line-up as loaded as that. While putting on stronger matches to a lot of traditional wrestling, there was the feeling it would kill the house shows, but I'd also seen Watts run a successful operation with the same formula. Bischoff said he didn't know that Nitro would be as successful but thought it would be competitive. When I heard the line-up, I thought it would be more of a dog fight. When Luger walked out and they did the challenge with Hogan, it was clear there would be a war. I remember the first Nitro because Bresloff called me up during every commercial break. He was telling me Eric was on a high because of how good things turned out. He was on the phone to Bischoff constantly during the show. When it was over, he said "Eric wants to know your thoughts," and I said, "Don't let anyone tell you differently. That was a great first show." For someone who hated me, and thought I didn't know anything, that pattern continued every Monday night for more than five years. I'd hear from WWF people after the shows all the time, and always on Tuesday, but I had to watch Nitro live and WWF on the West Coast feed, because Bresloff was looking for constant immediate feedback for Bischoff.

Every Tuesday, they'd fax me giant spreadsheet feedback of not just the ratings, but the quarters, and often, ridiculously detailed demo numbers. WWF faxed me the ratings as well with the quarter breakdowns as well. Bresloff would call and pass along to Bischoff what the numbers showed, who was in the segments on the two shows when there was movement. That was the birth of the detailed ratings comparisons that we logged for every star in both promotions during the war. It was an exciting period, for both companies, because Raw rose to the challenge at times, and eventually responded. In many ways, 1997 and 1998 were the best years to be a wrestling fan. Monday was wrestling night and while there were "B" shows all over the place, it was something new and it didn't feel overexposed like today, although with the pace of the booking, it was also clear the situation couldn't sustain itself.

The product was changing with a lot of new ideas. The production advancements on TV captured attention. Plus, there were a lot of marquee stars from the 80s that while physically past their prime, were not so far gone that the public felt them to be washed up, and new styles of wrestling taken from foreign markets were being introduced to the casual American fan for the first time. Even though Nitro was winning every week, the Bret Hart/Steve Austin/Shawn Michaels

dynamic on Raw was the best stuff on television.

Bischoff talked about his new tactic, of going on the air and being critical of WWF. He said there was a lot of opposition to it internally (very true) and there was a rule in wrestling that you never acknowledge the competition. It was a rule created by Vince McMahon. Many of the people in WCW came from there and believed you couldn't violate the established unbreakable McMahon rule., plus McMahon had this ominous aura about him, as in, people were afraid that if McMahon got mad, bad things would happen to WCW.

In 1991, McMahon sacrificed a lot of business in the Hogan vs. Flair feud because to do the feud right, you'd have to establish who Flair is fully, as the world champion of the other group who never lost. In July of 1991, when Flair was asked to lose the title first to Lex Luger, and then as Flair's relationship with Jim Herd disintegrated, he was asked to drop the title earlier to Barry Windham, and Flair was looking for a contract extension to drop the title, he didn't go to the TV taping he was asked to lose to Windham, and was fired. He never lost the title, and actually kept physical possession of the belt, since he had paid a security deposit on it and WCW had not paid him to get the belt back. When Flair went on television with the old NWA & WCW world title belt (before a later court ruling in favor of WCW stopped him from doing so a few months later), the announcers treated the belt he was wearing as fraudulent as opposed to his being a world champion who never lost the belt inside the ring.

The only people who gave the belt credibility were Flair and Bobby Heenan, both heels, and both portrayed as liars in storyline for claiming to be world champion. The reason was because that was the extent he would go to pretend no other promotions' existed. Although he changed within a few years, because in hiring Jim Cornette, part of the deal was he allowed Cornette to get in plus for his Smoky Mountain wrestling shows on WWF television.

But running down the opposition in promotional wars dated back to the beginnings of wrestling. Paul Heyman was already doing it as hard as he could on a local basis. Bill Watts and Ole Anderson did it in the 80s. True, nobody ever gave away finishes of taped shows that I was aware of, but badmouthing the other side was older than Mae Young, or even Frank Gotch. And it was only a few months before McMahon responded, with the Billionaire Ted skits.

"The dirtsheets and other media commentators at the time said we beat Raw by 'stealing' their audience."

Stealing the audience? In a wrestling war? Isn't that the goal? Again, somebody somewhere may have said something, as both sides had loyal fans. Vince McMahon likely said it, since he was consumed in the early years with how unfair everything was to him, not even recognizing the irony of the strategy being similar to how he competed with the other promotions in the 80s, only to a degree, the shoe was on the other foot. But dirtsheets? Come on. The implication that anyone with a clue to the business would be critical of him for winning viewers away, or creating new viewers for the genre, is beyond laughable. Besides, any look at viewership breakdowns showed both sides were drawing, when it came to age of viewership, very different audiences. Until almost the very end, WCW was dominant among older viewers because they had the stars those viewers grew up with. Only at its peak was WCW even competitive among teenagers, and almost never won among children.

Bischoff's next subject regarded the firing of Jesse Ventura and Steve Austin, which in actual time, was long before this. Ventura was making big money and didn't care, and openly pouted on the air. Bischoff ripped on Ventura and the story as he told it was accurate as to his performance. Bobby Heenan showed up and outperformed Ventura and got the prime Saturday job (the key show before Nitro) in the process. Ventura was used less and less, and he had a big contract, something in the neighborhood of \$350,000 to \$500,000, making him the highest paid announcer in history, rarely used, and acting like he didn't want to be there when used. Ventura was already a legendary announcer, but he didn't care, and Bischoff sent him home, with pay, until his contract expired.

Bischoff was very diplomatic over the Austin firing, even blaming himself on the communications issue. Austin wanted to work with Hogan on top, but once Hogan got there, Austin's push was over. Austin was U.S. champ, having finished a sizzling program with Ricky Steamboat that ended when a back injury ended Steamboat's career. Hogan's influence got Jim Duggan in, and he beat Austin in seconds to win the title. Austin got a few injuries and his attitude worsened. He held up a TV taping in Orlando because he outright refused to put over The Renegade, a talentless guy who didn't get over a lick whom Hogan had brought in with the idea they were fooling people into thinking he was the Ultimate Warrior. Renegade was already a flop by that point. The story he told, that they called Austin, his wife answered the phone and said he wasn't there, and that the person who called could hear Austin's voice in the background, is exactly as the story went around at the time. When Bischoff got the message, he decided to fire the guy, since they weren't pushing him anyway, and he had been injured regularly. That decision later became the wrestling equivalent of when the financially strapped Red Sox traded Babe Ruth to the Yankees. Like with Ruth, nobody at the time realized

how history would change because of that move, but Austin's talents were not a secret and it was even at the time considered a bad decision.

Bischoff just noted that firing Austin ended up being the greatest thing for Austin, because he accomplished more than what he could have had he stayed. Nobody knew Austin would be the star he became. But everyone in the business knew he was a real talent who should have been used better.

I enjoyed his stories regarding the trip to Pyongyang, North Korea, for the World Wrestling Peace Festival that drew 150,000 and 170,000 for the two shows. Bischoff's stories about being in North Korea, which were not wrestling stories, made for interesting reading. Actually one of the funniest stories he told me about the trip regarded a celebrity married couple.

At the time, Akira Hokuto was probably the biggest star in women's wrestling. Kensuke Sasaki was a major star in New Japan Pro Wrestling. The two had never met, but since Antonio Inoki brought some women wrestlers and WCW wrestlers along with Muhammad Ali and his New Japan stars for the two events, they were introduced. On the morning after the two had met, they were already engaged. They've now been married for more than ten years and have two children. It was pretty big news back in Japan that after one date, that the two were engaged. I just remember telling Bischoff about it when he got back, and he didn't know of the engagement, but told me that night you could certainly hear what was going on with the loud noise coming from their room through the thin walls.

He wrote about Brian Pillman. Bischoff loved the gimmick, although it started the "working the boys" era that drew no money and created incredible distrust and paranoia among the talent. By the end, I've never seen a promotion where nobody in the company trusted management to that degree. Inherently, that is going to be part of any wrestling company just by the nature of wrestlers and promoters. But this made things far worse than they needed to be. "The wrestlers didn't like it, of course," he wrote, "Because they felt like they were being worked. But I didn't really care." To this day, he showed no benefit of hindsight as to the atmosphere that created such disastrous morale.

Bischoff denied he was worked when Pillman got his release. I can only say from the Pillman thing that Pillman did like Eric Bischoff in the end, but there were few times I ever heard Pillman being happier in the business then when he called me to say how he actually convinced Bischoff to get management to send him a legitimate release as part of the angle so he could start negotiating with WWF. He was so proud of himself that he was able to work Bischoff into "making it real" by saying the office knew the firing wasn't real so that killed would kill the angle. So Bischoff gave him what they both agreed was a phony release paper, and somehow he'd continue to get paid his salary, except it was written up as if it was legally real. Bischoff and Sullivan were furious that Pillman began negotiating with WWF, but couldn't let on that it was all an angle, let alone get the heat from the company for basically what amounted to defrauding them. The agreement with Bischoff was he would go to ECW to make the angle real. Paul Heyman just loved the fact he could get Pillman, who was super hot with his audience, for a few months, as it is believed Heyman never directly dealt with Bischoff on this (although I could be wrong), as all dealings were said to have gone through Steve Karel and Pillman. As noted in the Pillman issue, he never wanted to go to WWF. He wanted to use WWF to get a main event money deal from Bischoff before coming back, figuring Bischoff would never want to lose the character he created, and was getting off on the idea he was pulling a work on everyone. Had he not gotten in the Humvee wreck, I believe that is how it would have turned out. Bischoff said that nobody will ever know who was working who, that he wasn't surprised Pillman went to WWF, categorizing it that in his mind, when it was the right time, he would come back. Um, Pillman signed a three year contract with a two year option with WWF in 1996. Just before his death, he did want WWF to release him and go back to WCW over Jim Ross ordering him to be drug tested. Bischoff lost Pillman because he wouldn't take the 90-day termination cycle out of his contract. In hindsight, was he wrong? Pillman was in a horrible accident and should have never wrestled again. I couldn't disagree with his business decision at the time because the accident nearly killed Pillman and even though Pillman lied to everyone saying doctors told him he'd make a full recovery (in fact, he stated he would be better than ever because the surgery would supposedly fully fix the 1985 ankle injury that ended his pro football career).

Bischoff had to be skeptical, even as Sullivan was telling him that the accident was another layer of the work. But to act like he was expecting him to come back to continue the angle when he gave WWF control of him for five years is a bit much.

Bischoff also noted the coroner found Pillman died of natural causes (the coroner listed long-term cocaine use as a contributing cause to his heart attack), and noted he went to the funeral. I saw him there and he was beating himself up over his decision which resulted in Pillman leaving WCW.

He told me that he never should have been there (in WWF) and said he should have made the deal to keep him, with the implication maybe if that part of his life had changed the end result would have been different. A cold businessman

could have chalked it up to good fortune that the death was at least not on his watch and nothing he would have to answer for. His reactions indicated the exact opposite. He noted in the book that the death caused negative stories in the media "despite the coroner's findings." I'm not sure if he didn't remember, because the cocaine aspect was mentioned on ESPN's "Outside the Lines" in doing a story on deaths in wrestling that focused heavily on Pillman, so it was not a secret, although it didn't actually come out until a long time after the death. Pillman's unusually enlarged heart at the time of his death and his use of Growth Hormone (not mentioned in the coroner's report because at the time they couldn't test to find a presence of artificially injected GH) was also likely a factor, as his wife believed and said publicly on the same show.

He used that to talk about how WCW had drug testing in place, but the procedure wasn't perfect, and noted there are many ways you can avoid testing positive both then and now. At least he was honest. Regarding the company drug testing, they absolutely tested guys. Some guys got caught and a few (Too Cold Scorpio comes to mind) were even fired. But the top stars were never tested. Sean Waltman, who was fired by WWF in the middle of a promotional war because of drug issues, came to WCW and noted in his entire time there, he was never once tested.

Next came a personal shot at me, saying "there were a couple of top wrestlers who at one point used to leak a lot of information to Dave Meltzer." Pot call kettle black. My experience with almost everyone in wrestling these days is positive, and believe me, it wasn't always that way. There is a public negative attitude from WWE, which at this point is both sad and funny. He used the term "moles" that leak information. Can you imagine that in 2006? Let alone given the person saying it. He also claimed now nobody feeds me any information because there is only one wrestling organization (huh?) and Vince is adamant about nobody talking. I haven't noticed any difference in ability to communicate with people or get information other than there is more news than ever, and it's harder for me than any time in my life to keep up with the people calling, hence a record number of issues this year. Worse, he linked me in the same sentence with Wade Keller without any sort of differentiation. For better or worse, we do completely different jobs. He claimed how I've adversely affected an industry, used the term "nerds who probably couldn't get or hold a job doing anything else." He was critical of the Observer web site for heavily promoting purchasing the newsletter. Yet, his business partner Jason Hervey aggressively recruited me to move my web site under his auspices for a web site company he was starting a few years back, and Bischoff called and tried to help the recruiting process. Bischoff himself has a web site designed mostly to promote purchasing his book. The criticism is equivalent to criticizing Raw or Smackdown for doing angles on the show that lead people to have to purchase PPVs. He insulted the grammar in the newsletter, which is obviously a valid criticism, because it's hard to get a proofreader to work from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. on Tuesday nights/Wednesday morning, when a large percentage of the writing is done. Bischoff created an environment for a lot of people to make a lot of money and in many ways benefitted the industry long-term by upping the quality of television. But you could make a case, and many have, that he has done more to adversely affect this industry than any single person in modern history. There was absolutely nothing more devastating long-term to this business than WCW folding and wrestling being taken off the Turner networks.

"It still amazes me that these goofs were able to influence people who would never even give them an interview for a legitimate job in the industry they wrote about." -- Eric Bischoff, the man who hired Mike Tenay, Bob Ryder and Mark Madden.

But he was prophetic. In 1998, when things were at their apex, talent was unhappy because most felt there was no upward mobility no matter how hard they worked, and there was so much talent that all but the top guys were underutilized. Bischoff told them to quit complaining so much and to realize how good they had it.

"There will come a day when you will look back and realize this was the best time in your careers," he said.

He tried to take credit for changing the business with the cruiserweight concept. He absolutely did more for the concept than Vince McMahon, who historically rejected it until it became a big enough part of the business that it couldn't be ignored, and then he still made sure it never garnered any steam. Of course, it was huge in certain places long before Bischoff. Kip Frey did it first in WCW by putting together Pillman vs. Jushin Liger, and I believe he would have done more with international talent had he been there longer. But it was dead when Bischoff resurrected it, and he did more with it than anyone at least on a national basis. He signed up an incredible amount of talented men, and probably did less with them than you could ever imagine. It meant a lot at one point, and it is still there in whatever limited form largely because Bischoff established it as part of the wrestling scene. But he essentially booked it to be such a low priority that the current Vince McMahon version is only slightly less meaningless. He said he loved the division. Funny that WCW's best cruiserweights all achieved far more success

outside of WCW.

This led to the story of the decision to unmask Rey Mysterio. He said he wanted Mysterio to be a character kids could relate to so he made the decision because Mysterio is a good-looking guy and getting the mask off would take him to the next level. Mysterio was never the star without the mask that he was with it, particularly when it came to kids and potential for selling merchandise. That was largely the feeling at the time, although it was a mixed bag. There were people who felt the Mexicans couldn't get over with masks on, and other who felt the masked wrestlers if pushed correctly and merchandised would have the ability to be popular with children. In late 1996, Mysterio's quarter hours routinely did 20% better than anyone else among those under the age of 12, an audience WCW was never good at capturing. But after a few months, when it became clear Mysterio's upward mobility had ended and he was limited to being in a certain position, that was no longer the case. While Mysterio has been a tremendous TV ratings mover on Smackdown the past two years and one of WWE's biggest merchandise sellers, the younger and more exciting performer in WCW actually for a long period of time was a ratings liability, particularly during the Filthy Animals period without the mask.

He next talked about his idea to turn Hulk Hogan heel, leaving out that it was the crowd turning on him that largely necessitated the move. He categorized the NWO as drawing "some of the highest ratings cable programs have ever received." It was a glory day for the company, and among the highest rated cable programming at the time, but several hundreds of individual cable shows, if not more, have drawn better ratings than Nitro at its peak.

Here's a gem, "Despite what WWE would like people to think--and despite what dirtsheet writers love to say--I didn't steal those guys." Yep, doing exactly what Vince McMahon did to establish his company is somehow wrong. Don't get me wrong, besides Vince McMahon, who actually tried to explain the difference (his argument was he had to do it with his own money while Eric was doing it with Ted's, as if that argument washes in the free enterprise system), the only people who said that were those with no sense of history. There were people who thought Bischoff was doing something wrong by trying to sign the top talent during a wrestling war. Just nobody who has a clue.

Regarding the Hogan NWO turn, "There had been no leaks because no one knew anything to leak." He claimed nobody knew until the last minute because it wasn't finalized, and there was a back-up plan of Sting being the one to turn as late as the day of the show. All I know is about two weeks out, I thought it was fairly common knowledge inside the company, but everyone who knew made it clear it was off the record, so I don't think I reported it ahead of time. There may have been negotiations and it may not have been final until the day of the show, but as far as it being the internal plan, that was not a secret in the company. At least it seemed everyone I spoke with in WCW knew it. I do know Bruce Mitchell reported it ten days before the fact.

A few weeks earlier, I saw Bischoff at the World Wrestling Peace Festival in Los Angeles on June 1, 1996. Even though Bischoff was the producer of the 1994 AAA When World's Collide PPV show, which blew away everything the company was doing at the time, he never actually watched the show. Kevin Sullivan had already made the call to bring in Mysterio, who had gotten over huge in ECW. It was the first time Bischoff saw him. It was also the first time Bischoff met Chris Jericho. He'd just seen a tape of one of the Super J Cups where Jericho was in (in fact, he wrestled Chris Benoit), which was an idea I was trying to push for a singular episode of Nitro as a way to elevate the division. Later, they even told Dean Malenko he could book a tournament like they did in Japan, but then changed their mind. Bischoff asked Benoit about the guy he saw on the tape and if they should sign him. Benoit was extremely positive. Bischoff told me that he didn't even need to watch Jericho wrestle that night, because Benoit's word and seeing his look was good enough. But it was not good enough to ever let the guy get a reasonable opportunity to get over. Less than two years later, and this was when business was at its peak, I was constantly harping that they needed to make new talent as you can't go with the same stars forever. Bischoff at the time totally dismissed the idea that the people I was suggesting--Benoit, Guerrero, Jericho and Mysterio--could be top guys due to their size, although was open to Benoit, saying he wrestled a style that made him come across as "bigger than he is." Jericho, more than the others, was the complete package, because he could promo, which was a weakness with the other three at the time. Bischoff dismissed Jericho by saying people wouldn't believe in him on top because they wouldn't believe he was really tough, and that his teenage son (who trained martial arts under Ernest Miller) could take Jericho. Even when warned the momentum was changing, his attitude was that whoever has Hogan will ultimately win in the end, citing Austin in mid-1998 as "a flash in the plan."

But at the time in 1996, Bischoff was so proud of himself, and he deserved it, for pulling off the NWO angle (which had yet to be named). Hogan at this point hadn't joined. He said the biggest thrill was the fact they were going to take the real-life angle McMahon made public with the Billionaire Ted skits, and

use them to draw money and beat McMahon. Well a few of the early Billionaire Ted skits were hilarious, by the end they got very mean-spirited, not that Bischoff's early remarks weren't any different. Bischoff got the idea of outsiders in the promotion from watching how much heat there was at a UWFI vs. New Japan Tokyo Dome event. At the time, he didn't know how long the angle could go, and was hoping it could stay hot until Starrcade of 1996.

Although he denied is vehemently in the book, I would venture to say anyone who spoke with Bischoff at all knew that it wasn't just about helping WCW, that he was consumed with beating Vince McMahon. He couldn't stop talking about it. In 1997, he was brag with glee that McMahon was going to be forced out of the business. It was funny that there were a lot of wrestlers on both sides into the fight and their side winning. That attitude partially killed the 2001 Invasion angle. But to any veteran who understood the game, the most important thing was to make sure neither side won, and that both sides stayed strong.

He did another dirtsheet diatribe about Road Wild. I know that Bresloff always threw his off-arena ideas at me, like Spring Break-Out in Panama City, the Bash on Huntington Beach and Mall of America idea (all of which were his) and I was in favor of them. With Sturgis, the fact is, the first time, I just didn't know. Not being a biker, I'd heard of the Sturgis Rally, and it sounded like a rowdy atmosphere. The problem was, the shows sucked every year, and the atmosphere was the reason why. The first year was a learning experience, but when it was a bad show specifically because of the location, the idea of continuing to go there seemed like a mistake. The crowds didn't want to watch any undercard wrestling, and were only into a few superstars. Dean Malenko and Chris Benoit put on what would have been an incredible match on one of the shows, and the crowd crapped all over them. They also hated Blacks, which created kind of ugly overtones at the shows. After the first year, the combination of all that, plus giving away gate money and merchandise money, which by 1998 was huge, yeah, Guilty as Charged. Of course, in 1998, the company was making so much money, they could afford to do it and you could almost justify it as Bischoff's perk for building the company and a lot of the talent did enjoy being there. In 1999, the company lost money for the year, and the company ordered it off the schedule in 2000.

Bischoff got off on the Randy Anderson angle, which was effective in making him a heel. He didn't mention Anderson, who has since passed away, had been suffering from cancer, and that the cancer was part of the storyline as Bischoff fired him in front of his wife and kids and laughed about it. They even had his wife beg for his job and he laughed at her as well. Somehow, really, he equated this angle to finally achieving what he saw in Japanese pro wrestling. His argument was that they didn't think wrestling was real, but they believed his character was real.

He wrote about Paul Heyman. "According to some alleged histories of wrestling, both Vince McMahon and I took our best ideas from ECW. But the truth is, I didn't pay much attention to ECW at all." I just remember how it used to be comedy that an idea would be on ECW, and then on Nitro just a few weeks later. But I do believe Bischoff on what he said, since Kevin Sullivan, who booked at the time, was the one who apparently would come up with those ideas in question.

He said how the internet and dirtsheets would say how Bischoff was stealing his talent because ECW has them on the run. Again, there probably were people somewhere saying it, but the companies were never on the same level, although the gap did close by the end. WCW took a lot of guys from ECW. In most cases, the guys called first because they knew they could get much better money offers. Some guys were brought in and couldn't even hang with the company, or were signed to good contracts and the company didn't use them, and were fired and ended up going back. The free market system and attempting to compete nationally without the financial backing made ECW doomed to failure.

"We were doing 5s and 6s on TNT; he was doing .5s on what was then The Nashville Network. We were putting 15, 20, 25,000 people in arenas all over the country; he was putting 1,100 in a Bingo Hall. His PPVs drew nothing. There was no reason to believe that we were on the same playing field competitively."

The only year ECW was on TNN was 2000. That year Nitro averaged a 2.68 and ECW an 0.9. WCW averaged 2,677 paid per show and ECW averaged around 1,100. Both groups were ranging from 40,000 to 99,000 buys on PPV. ECW's best PPV that year beat WCW's best, which speaks volumes for how badly WCW had destroyed its product. Still, ECW was taking in say \$5 million and spending \$8 million (those numbers aren't exact but also wouldn't be far off). WCW was taking in maybe \$125 million and spending \$188 million. They weren't playing on the same field.

Bischoff talked about a meeting he had with Heyman, blaming Heyman for telling Vince McMahon that Bischoff was on cocaine (Bischoff denied it in his book, saying he kept stepping away from the meeting to take phone calls). Bischoff related a deposition by Jerry McDevitt in the lawsuit filed by WWF against WCW for unfair trade practices, asking him shortly the meeting if he was using cocaine. There was a meeting at Morton's Steak House in Orlando. He talked about a wrestler who was leaving ECW and Heyman was threatening a lawsuit, and then

made fun of how poorly written ECW's contracts were (funny, only because whenever WCW took someone under contract, it always resulted in WCW having to pay ECW or make reparations which would indicate someone in WCW legal thought the contracts were legal). While not mentioned, the wrestler in question this meeting was about was Raven. Bischoff made fun of Heyman's contracts, said Raven wasn't being paid, and said nobody at the time knew there was a connection between WWF and ECW, and that Heyman was being "subsidized" by McMahon. Subsidized, as noted elsewhere, was a funny word. As far as nobody knowing there was a connection, you'd have to be naive not to know. WWF was sending developmental talent to ECW. WWF was sending wrestles to ECW for Heyman to come up with ideas to repackage them. There had already been a short-lived WWF prelim guys vs. ECW main eventers feud, that Heyman figured for credibility reasons he had to find a way out of.

He wrote an interesting chapter about the usage of Dennis Rodman and the negotiations. He said that Hogan called him and he'd gotten off the phone with Rodman, who was talking about doing a deal with WWF. Hogan had befriended Rodman, who had shown up at a WCW PPV in a much lower key fashion than he later would do. WWF had the idea of Rodman vs. Goldust at Wrestlemania, in the spot Roddy Piper ended up getting when WCW outmaneuvered WWF for the deal. Bischoff said the deal was for \$1 million, which was lower than was reported. Actually, that was exactly what was reported on the first deal. A later deal, which he didn't mention, was for a \$1.5 million base and a percentage of the gate. Those figures were confirmed because Rodman sued WCW and in the suit it came out that with his percentage, in the tag match involving Karl Malone, Rodman got \$2.25 million. Rodman's first few appearances got tons of media exposure and were huge draws. The Malone match was the second biggest PPV the company ever did. By the third meeting, with WCW hitting the skids, he meant very little.

In reference to the Bill Goldberg phenomenon, he noted a lot of people have taken credit for his success. The actual win streak number idea came from Tenay, and they used legitimate numbers of his matches for several months. The huge mistake was when they took something great that was working, and decided to work it. Even though people deep down knew his wins weren't real, Goldberg's explosiveness was like nothing ever seen before and he had the aura of being real. When he gave The Giant (Big Show) a jackhammer, people believed he must have been one of the strongest men in the world. For reasons I could never understand, they went from using the "real" number to making up wins that never happened. It didn't kill Goldberg, who still drew big ratings every time he appeared and drew until the company imploded, but you stopped seeing all the signs with the numbers in the crowd. It took the beyond wrestling aspect of the character off. On the list of stupid booking decisions, it wouldn't make the top 100, but they both lucked and created something unique and special that bonded with the audience and allowed them to take one aspect of the show seriously. For no reason at all, as if inflating numbers was going to add to ratings, they took something working better than anything they had, and made sure their audience saw it was nothing to take seriously.

*We will continue with part three next week.*

\*\*\*\*\*  
*Part three of our history of WCW starts with Bischoff's recollections of his negotiations to bring in Bret Hart.*

Bischoff claimed he had a conversation with Hart after his WWF contract expired in 1996, but claimed "contrary to what was reported at the time and has been reported ever since, we never got into serious negotiations."

In actuality, what happened then is an open book. Bischoff asked Hart what it would take to bring him to WCW. Hart, who had no intention of leaving WWF at the time, responded by saying, "The same deal as Hogan." Bischoff said absolutely no way. Bischoff asked for Hart to come up with a counter idea, and to suggest a money figure. Hart threw out \$3 million a year, knowing full well, at least in his mind, that figure was ridiculous. Bischoff said to let him see if he could do it. "Not serious negotiations" saw both sides go back and forth with him. At one point, WCW and WWF both expected Hart was headed to WCW. Hart himself went back-and-forth. There were Hollywood types who were working with Hart in getting booked who were also pushing Hart toward WCW, because of the feeling WWF was impossible to deal with. McMahon has talked about this period and after losing Kevin Nash and Scott Hall earlier in the year, those under him were staying it would be a perception disaster if Hart would at the time go to WCW.

Even after McMahon went to Calgary to Hart's house to persuade him with the famed 20-year contract offer, Hart was still debating for a time. WCW was still trying to make the deal as late as the day before the Raw WWF had already advertised as his coming back. Bret Hart was in San Jose for an autograph signing and was still getting phone calls from WCW trying to get him to pull out of his WWE verbal deal. The weekend before he was to start on Raw, Bischoff had a new WCW contract faxed to him in San Jose, although by that point he had already made his decision to stay with WWF. McMahon, when he found out Hart had the actual contract on him in San Jose, he asked him bring it to Raw and to defiantly rip the contract up in the ring. Hart refused, and actually left the contract in San Jose with a friend. On television, he mentioned he had talked with another organization and on TV, while never mentioning WCW or Bischoff by name but everyone knew what he was talking about, and said on McMahon's TV about how professional they were to deal with. At the time, my relationship with Hart was very much contentious, but as it turned out one of my best friends was with Hart as he showed him the contract. It was for \$2.8 million per year for three years. The ironic part of it was, since Bischoff claimed in the book how other departments would shift expenses over to WCW, inflating losses, only \$800,000 of the contract was from WCW. The other \$2 million came from Turner Home Entertainment, listed as an annual guarantee as a movie actor for the studio. The shifting of expenses clearly went both ways, to quite a degree. It should be noted that was not necessarily the same terms of the contract Hart did sign with Bischoff more than a year later, as when Hart came a year later it was for \$2.5 million per year for three years.

Bischoff gave McMahon the "out" he needed while at the same time noting that the WWF claim as to why Montreal happened, that Hart would go to Nitro the next night with the belt, was ridiculous and could not have happened.

He said Vince thought Hart would throw the WWF belt in the garbage can like with Madusa. Bischoff noted that was never the plan, and even if he wanted it to be the plan, he couldn't have done it. Turner legal by that point had told Bischoff not to do anything to add to the lawsuit WWF had filed against WCW. Fact is, WWF had noted the Madusa deal as a lawsuit point, and McMahon himself in 1991 had lost two court cases involving Flair and putting the WCW belt on television, which both sides were fully aware of. Bischoff portrayed it as McMahon knew none of this, and therefore that's why he didn't trust a similar situation with Madusa happening. Actually, McMahon had to have known, since it was his company that had filed the lawsuit, and he knew full well the stinging loss of two suits in 1991 over putting an opposition championship belt on television. Bischoff did say McMahon had nothing to fear, and the incident was unnecessary and unfortunate, although on the other hand, he noted that everyone made money off it.

He said Hart was not the same, saying he lacked passion and commitment in WCW, and was ultimately a disappointment. He said the company was criticized for not using him correctly, but blamed it on Hart. He never addressed any aspect of the strange booking of Hart, saying you could write a good movie, but if the lead actor isn't delivering, it's not going to work. With only a few exceptions, the Hart in WCW never seemed to be the Hart in WWF. He never seemed happy, or comfortable. His not panning out like he should have can be blamed some on both sides, but if you are going to assign blame, a minimum of 80% would have to be on WCW. There was an early Nitro incident where Hart was put in the position Sting had been in, where he made a save and bounced around many members of the NWO "B" team. The crowd cheered him, but didn't go all that wild like they used to when Sting was put in the same position. I

remember things being second guessed. Of course by then, they had already scrapped his program with Flair, even though it drew shockingly well, because a lot of fans cheered Flair. Then they dropped his tag team with Flair, before even having one match together, for reasons that were never made clear other than probably because Flair was getting over and had the wrong political enemies at the time. The last thing some people in the "in-clique" at the time wanted was a scenario like a Flair & Hart tag team where Flair would be featured, because of the knowledge if you gave Flair an inch with WCW fans, he'd get over in a heartbeat. Bischoff never mentioned the internal politics in the meetings and who was burying who, which was a huge part of the organization at the time.

From a wrestling fan perspective, the story of the 1997 Sting vs. Hulk Hogan match was a highlight. Bischoff did admit the Starrcade match was handled wrong, and that Sting should have gotten a dynamic clean win. He said the idea everyone expected from that match was the idea that was planned. He blamed it not happening on Hogan balking. He did not support Hogan on this, but said Sting showed up out of shape, and Hogan used that as his reason for not doing it. He noted the planned finish with the fast count and Bret Hart coming out saying nobody else would get screwed (this was Hart's first WCW appearance, one month after the Montreal match). I don't know who came up with the idea of playing off Montreal, but it was Bischoff who enthusiastically told me it as if he'd come up with this great idea, like Hall & Nash as the Outsiders, to make money off something McMahon handed them.

Whether it was a good idea or not will never be known. I can only tell you that the Hogan getting the fast count win part of the story, before losing to Sting in the restart, was planned several weeks before the match. Of course, the strange part of the match presentation is that Nick Patrick didn't deliver a fast count as Hogan pinned Sting. It made Sting look bad, as all fans could see on his big night, Hogan beat him clean. It made Hart look bad in his debut for complaining about a clean finish. And when it was re-started for no logical reason, it made Sting look bad for winning. Bischoff claimed to have no idea why things happened the way they did, other than saying if he believed Patrick had screwed up on purpose, he'd have fired him. Patrick has always claimed he thought he was delivering a fast count.

I don't know if this really was as big a deal long-term as people point out today. It was the biggest PPV match in company history and Sting was more over at that point than he ever had been or would ever be. The finish did take the edge off him, but I was never confident he could keep it because it was so artificial, in that he got over based on the fact he didn't wrestle for months. We'll never know. The plan was never for Sting to hold the title for any length of time to begin with, as everyone in the company at that time knew Sting was all smoke and mirrors and would be exposed rather quickly as world champion.

Then again, at that time, long-term for the company looked really good. They were winning big, they were loaded with talent, and the house show business was taking off. Hart, coming off Montreal, figured to be the hottest wrestler in the business and the idea was that having Hart would give WCW a fighting chance to either duel equally or win Canada. Ironically, even though many Canadian markets would have been instant sellouts with Hart, Hogan and Flair on top in early 1998, it wasn't until a long time later, long after the peak, that WCW started going into Canada. By that point they had already taken the edge off Hart.

The plan for 1998 was to basically duplicate the booking of 1997, with Hart beating everyone all year, and building for the dream match at Starrcade with Hogan, which would be pushed as their first-ever singles meeting. Of course, none of that ever came close to happening.

But at the time, there was no reason to believe they couldn't duplicate the success. But when Hart was put with Ric Flair on the January 24, 1998, Souled Out PPV from Dayton, became maybe the first WCW PPV show to do "Hogan numbers," without Hogan. And that was with a rushed build that appeared designed to flop. Suddenly the program was nixed. WCW had two thresholds on PPV, the Hogan shows and the non-Hogan shows. The non-Hogan shows never did Hogan numbers. Hogan worked a lot of the shows, but his power when it came to the company was because the shows he wasn't on rarely came close to those he was. Sure, he had his bombs as well, but the general rule held up. This show figured to do well, but it did Hogan numbers without Hogan. But instead of paying attention to the buy rate, things got derailed because Flair got maybe 40% cheers, perhaps even 50%.

Anyone with any understanding of the dynamic would have known that going in. When Hogan was a baby face, in a large percentage of the markets WCW went to, Flair would be cheered more than him, and nobody saw that, at least until 1996 when the reaction became overwhelming, that it was evidence the program wasn't working. It was just understood Flair was always going to have his fans.

The face-to-face interviews were great, if anything more because of Flair. The match was strong, as it was the best singles match Flair had in a while. But it was deemed a failure because Flair was getting cheered. So they canceled the feud and instead tried to position them as a tag team. After a few weeks of

angles that were getting over, and before ever having a match together, they decided to cancel that. But Goldberg was sneaking through unnoticed and becoming the company's hottest star.

He talked about WWF signing Mike Tyson and how that started turning the company around. He didn't bring up a part of the story not really remembered or reported on. Like with Rodman, when Bischoff found out, they were looking to make a similar deal. Tyson's people were telling WCW that they hadn't signed after Tyson in WWF had already started to be teased on television. Bischoff was in there making a play to sign him as well. Exactly how it all went down I'm not sure, but I do know that when WCW found out what it would cost to match the WWF's offer for Tyson, they decided against trying to match it.

The feeling was that \$1.5 million for Dennis Rodman had paid off, but you couldn't make a \$3.5 million deal work. To make it work, Tyson alone would have to increase buys by about 280,000. Keep in mind that in 1997, WWF never once hit that figure, even for Wrestlemania or the famed Survivor Series match. If you figure the 1997 Wrestlemania did 237,000 buys, Tyson being there would have to more than double it to pay off. You can see why WCW likely backed off. Of course, instead of doubling it, Tyson increased buys to 730,000 for the 1998 Wrestlemania, and WWF was on its way. WCW still beat WWF every week in the ratings leading up to that Wrestlemania, but to prove what ratings meant in the big picture, the 1998 Mania significantly outperformed even the Hogan vs. Sting match when WCW's popularity had peaked. In hindsight, that was the best \$3.5 million Vince McMahon ever spent. The ratings gap did close up, and the rub of Tyson made Steve Austin the biggest star in the business. Within a few weeks, the tables had turned in the head-to-head ratings everyone was living and dying with.

Bischoff's description of the period when Raw went ahead was: "Our numbers were still very solid. Our revenues were still very solid. We were still growing and meeting all of our projections. In the real corporate world—as opposed to the world of dirtsheet writers—as long as we met our projections and forecasts, no one complained about anything."

In fact, panic set in the first week Raw went ahead. He can portray it any way he wants to, but those who were there and talking with everyone can remember vividly how everything changed, and needlessly. He was right, business was still booming, but WCW was doing everything wrong: hotshotting, no long-term planning, over relying on older stars and doing nothing to build for the future. Business actually remained good for about another year, but Bischoff was constantly panicking, looking for the hotshot to win the week, as opposed to building a base by elevating new talent that would enable another run. In fact, WWF had rallied its fan base against WCW by terming it "The Seniors Tour," even though WCW had far more talented younger wrestlers than WWF could ever dream of having. But all were stuck in prelims.

The ideas got crazy. Once, he announced a contest where one fan would get \$1 million. It was a takeoff on a WWF idea where they, as a promotion for PPV shows, gave away a house to the winner of a drawing. The higher-ups at Turner, after the contest had been publicly announced on television, pulled the plug on it, and it was never mentioned again. He ordered the building of a new set for Nitro, and was bragging that the new set would turn the ratings around, as if anyone cared about that. It was a complete embarrassment when he predicted record numbers after building up the new set on Nitro, and it meant zero in the ratings. Almost immediately after Raw took the lead, Bischoff challenged Vince McMahon to a fight.

Of course, having to placate the McMahon ego in the sense that Vince can't be seen as publicly backing down from a fight, Bischoff claimed he fully expected McMahon to show up in Worcester, MA, for the May 14, 1998 Slamboree PPV. He claimed McMahon didn't come because Stephanie was graduating college that weekend. In fact, Stephanie did graduate college that day, but one had nothing to do with the other, other than Jim Ross, on the WWF's hotline, involved in a hotline feud with Gene Okerlund of WCW at the time, tried to use that as the reason McMahon didn't come after the fact. To show how nasty things were, on that same hotline report, Ross asked what were the qualifications needed to be a Nitro girl, and in specific brought up the tall brunette (rumors abounded how Rebecca Curci got her position on the Nitro Girls squad because her dancing was nowhere near the level of the rest of the women, and as the irony would be eight years later, she is now the wife of Shawn Michaels). More importantly, to show what was happening behind the scenes, Janie Engle, Bischoff's personal secretary, quit to take a job in public relations with WWF. She was the third WCW front office employee to quit that week, due to the internal pressure of a company cracking because they were losing in the ratings.

"I fully expected Vince to show up. We had security waiting outside at all the exits. They had explicit orders that if Vince or an WWE (sic) representative showed up, they were to be escorted to the locker room and ring posthaste, no questions asked."

In reality, either his memory failed or he's kissing up. The actual situation at the time was humorous. Even though the competition was close,

McMahon could see Bischoff had lost it and was laughing at it, and also making Bischoff's life miserable. He said that if Bischoff wanted a fight, they could arrange one, but he wasn't about to show up on a WCW show. In fact, WWF made a very public response, as well as a private legal response through Jerry McDevitt. McDevitt threatened Bischoff with a suit claiming they were false advertising and engaging in a bait and switch promotion. What got even funnier was Bischoff went on the air and laughed about McMahon not coming, and said on the air specifically after getting the letter, that Vince wasn't going to be there. Bischoff, on television, told everyone that if they were buying the PPV to see Vince McMahon, don't buy the show because the match wasn't going to happen. It should also be noted how effective all this controversy was on the viewing audience. The Thunder episode featuring two Bischoff promos on the never happening match, his training tape of him doing kickboxing, played twice and it being the major theme of the show, was a terrible overkill show that drew the lowest rating in the history of the program.

Afterwards, McDevitt then wrote him another nasty legal letter, saying that in pro wrestling, when you go on TV and say something isn't going to happen, that fans are conditioned to believe it is, and thus, they were still illegally using McMahon's name to build up their buy rate. WWF complained to the entire cable industry that WCW was using bait & switch tactics in promoting the PPV. Imagine WWF complaining about bait & switch. A war does funny things. Two years earlier, WWF did a parody of WCW where it made fun of WCW's older wrestlers being so big because they were doing steroids, and by this point WWF had dropped its drug testing program. So complaining to cable companies about bait & switch was hardly the biggest sign of incredible gall. McDevitt's letter labeled Vince McMahon "the reason for the ratings" of Raw, which Bischoff actually read on the air, and made a joke out of that line, emphasizing Vince McMahon as "the reason for the ratings."

"I consider Eric Bischoff's (McMahon always spelled Bischoff's last name wrong in those days not because of disdain but because McMahon was a notoriously poor speller), challenge a cheap and desperate tactic to increase WCW PPV buys," said McMahon the week before the show. "I will not do anything to help WCW increase their PPV buys. Therefore, I will not appear at Turner's next PPV as invited. However, if Mr Bischoff is hell bent on fighting me, then such a fight can be arranged at any time, in any parking lot in the country, void of television cameras, photographers and public announcement."

This wasn't so much McMahon wanting to fight, although for two men who talked about fighting and challenged and accepted a secret fight, suddenly neither was interested in going forward. But to his audience, McMahon response was clever. Obviously he was not about to show up. But he didn't back down either. He actually accepted, with full knowledge it would never happen. Whether Bischoff, when he started the storyline actually thought he could goad McMahon to an event, I don't know, but when the idea first started, the impression I was getting from those close to him is he really believed McMahon would come. Clearly it was never going to happen, but losing in the ratings changed Bischoff. But over the last two weeks, he knew full well he wasn't, and a schedule conflict on that Sunday had nothing to do with it.

There were plenty of times in 1996 and 1997 where it appeared McMahon was cracking under the pressure of losing, and I'm sure at this point he took great glee that it only took a few weeks of the tables being turned to where Bischoff did in a public and spectacular fashion.

The funny part of all this is, WCW was still on fire. The peak of Bill Goldberg was yet to come, but when WWF started outdrawing them head-to-head on Monday, the entire mentality changed. Keep in mind that with Nitro airing a replay, that significantly more people were still watching Nitro than Raw each week. But WCW had the feel of a company already falling apart at the seams.

The company had pulled so far out in front that they never believed they would be challenged. It was the fighter in a fight winning round after round, and suddenly, when they thought winning was a formality, they were nailed with a punch to the jaw that put them on the canvas. They got up and kept fighting, but the psyche was cracked. Bischoff became erratic and self-destructed under the pressure of losing. He looked at every problem except the big one. They were losing ground because the other side was getting its main event programs over stronger by utilizing newer stars. With the exception of Goldberg, who was a fluke, and DDP, who was a new star but past 40, WCW had not pushed anyone new to a significant level even with more roster depth than any company in the history of the business.

*We'll continue this story in upcoming weeks.*

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*

*We pick up with part four of our history of WCW right as Raw had just started to overtake Nitro in the ratings.*

Instead of taking it in stride and trying to build new stars, Bischoff fought the losing battle of throwing everything out there every Monday night to win. Some weeks it even worked—at least for the week, like putting the Goldberg title win over Hogan on free television. But as 1998 came to a close, the Monday night wins were only a part of history. Even though PPV and house shows were on fire, and Monday ratings were still very good and sometimes excellent at the end of the year, just not as good as the competition, Bischoff completely lost perspective.

Bischoff's memory of the Hogan-Goldberg title change was also different than it happened. He claimed Hogan called him one day and said, "Put me in a match with Goldberg. Let him beat me for the title."

The July 6, 1998, show at the Georgia Dome drew WCW's all-time biggest crowd of 41,412 fans—selling out the set up for the Dome, and even turning people away. There were 36,506 paid, and it did a \$906,330 gate, all company records. As a live event went, it was the most successful pro wrestling event in the U.S. ever promoted by anyone other than Vince McMahon. In many ways, that was the high water mark for the promotion, even though they were losing Mondays more often than winning.

The real story of the match is that several weeks in advance, more than 20,000 tickets had been sold with nothing pushed other than Nitro at the Georgia Dome. The big draw was Goldberg, who was living in Atlanta and had become something of a national hero in a short period of time. By this point, with his winning streak gimmick, he was a far bigger draw than Sting ever was,

or more than even a correctly booked Bret Hart could have been, as far as in building for an eventual title showdown with Hogan.

He was bigger in his home town than anywhere else. When Zane Bresloff told Hogan that they were going to do about 35,000 people for the show, Hogan, ever the student of manipulation, suggested adding a non-title dark match with him against Goldberg, and for Bresloff to start pushing it immediately in all the local advertising. The intent was obvious, particularly since many of the bigwigs at Time Warner were to be attending the show. When seeing such a crowd, they would credit both Goldberg and Hogan for drawing it. What was drawing the house was Nitro, of course, which would have topped 20,000 by itself, but the icing was clearly Goldberg. Seven months earlier, they ran Nitro at the Georgia Dome, this time with Sting as the big draw coming off Starrcade, and did 23,058 paid and 26,773 total—both company records and considered amazing numbers at the time. The company was actually slightly cooler on a nation basis by July, as the true peak of WCW was in February of 1998, when they legitimately had something like two dozen consecutive sold out house shows across the country, a mark no other promotion has ever matched. The added 12,000 fans they were going to do from the prior show was mostly the kind of drawing power Goldberg had in Atlanta. The last 6,000 and those turned away, and the fact is, they could have sold a lot more tickets if they were available, were from the Hogan vs. Goldberg match dynamic.

Hogan said he'd put Goldberg over clean. It wasn't even an issue. It was the right thing for the local market, which was all that would know about it, and Hogan would get half credit for the record house to every bigwig in the Time Warner organization. It would be remembered as the night Hogan & Goldberg drew the record house.

The idea, at first, was not to do a title change or have the never-before-seen match on television, since everyone knew that match was going to be as big, and most likely bigger, when it was finally done on PPV than the Hogan vs. Sting match.

So they started advertising locally a Hogan vs. Goldberg non-title match that would not be on television. On June 29<sup>th</sup>, Raw drew a 5.36 rating, at the time the highest rated wrestling show that had gone opposed in history, headlined by Steve Austin beating Kane for the WWF title. Nitro did a 4.05, what it had been averaging, but when Raw started, Nitro dropped in minutes from a 4.9 to 3.6. In the main event slot, Austin vs. Kane did a 5.94, while WCW had an angle involving Hogan, Karl Malone and Dennis Rodman, that did a 3.99. After that full point plus drubbing, it was announced, shockingly on Thunder, that Hogan vs. Goldberg for the title would be on Nitro the next Monday from the Georgia Dome.

Few remember the company's biggest match possible, and the title change, was done with only a few days build-up for what should have been a six month build match. At the time, angles had already been shot for Hogan future title defenses planned against Kevin Nash and Bret Hart, before even getting to the big money showdown with Goldberg, and seven days before, there was no thought process whatsoever regarding Hogan losing the title or Goldberg getting it. That's not as unusual as it sounds, because WCW wasn't planning much of anything concrete in advance, so it wasn't like there was even a date planned for such a match like Starrcade. Common sense would have put it around early 1999. That build would have greatly delayed the decline, but the reality is, the decline and fall were already inevitable.

Hogan put Goldberg over clean in the middle with no strings attached. There was no Ultimate Warrior scene stealing sabotage, Sting double-crossing or outworking Rock in losing involved. He could not have done a better job for getting Goldberg over, at least on that night. Of course, when Hogan remained the focal point of the promotion and suddenly champ Goldberg was in the No. 2 matches on PPV, it took the edge off the win and took away some of Goldberg's unbelievable momentum. But for all the flaws, at this point, business was still very strong, even though every Tuesday when the ratings came in, the company carried itself like losers and were constantly looking for the quick fix.

In return for dropping the title on television, Hogan got the promise that when Goldberg's winning streak was to end, he would be the one who would get to beat him and win the title. Of course, he never did get the win back, and as crazy as this sounds in hindsight, there was never a Hogan vs. Goldberg match on PPV. In the political manipulations that followed, Nash got the first win over Goldberg, but Hogan would get to carry the title. This all had to do with people who were having the power of manipulation, with no thought on what would be the best plan of action for the company and business.

Bischoff's response for pissing away a show that would have probably taken in more money than any show in company history?

"Of course, I was criticized in the di#heets. But at that point if they criticized me, it usually convinced me that I was doing the right thing."

If that first match had been given the right build-up for months as opposed to a few days, would have probably exceeded 650,000 buys. It may

have challenged the 730,000 that Wrestlemania did that year if held off for Starrcade or the next spring.

They couldn't even do a rematch because Hogan wouldn't do a second job and everyone knew Goldberg shouldn't lose to Hogan at that time. Even in 1999, everyone understood Goldberg doing a second job to Hogan after Nash wasn't the right thing for business. And eight years later, he's trying to defend that it was the right thing, even though it looks even worse in hindsight than it did at the time.

The Hogan vs. Goldberg match itself drew a 6.91 rating and more than seven million viewers. At the time it was the most watched match in the history of cable television, although many WWF matches in 1999 would end up breaking that record. WCW even broke the record later in the year. WCW turned the ratings around big-time due to the Goldberg two hour title chase (Goldberg also beat Scott Hall early in the show in a match he had to win to get his title shot) doing a 4.93 to 4.00 for Raw.

"We felt it was okay to blow things up on television, giving them away for free, because by doing that we would build our audience over the long-term, getting more people to sample the program."

There could be a valid argument made for that at the time. Far more people saw the match, and as noted, one of the greatest memories in not only the history of the promotion, but in the modern era of the business, would be that giant crowd reaction when Goldberg beat Hogan with that huge crowd exploding. But with the benefit of hindsight, that thought process falls apart.

Even coming off perhaps the most memorable moment in Nitro history, a week everyone assumed Nitro would win simply off that momentum, Raw won the next week. But it was close, 4.65 to 4.46. A week later, everything was back to where it had been before the Hogan-Goldberg match. It did nothing at all to build the audience over the long-term, nor change the long-term direction of where things were going. Goldberg, because he won the title and was working semifinals and Hogan was still on top, lost a lot of steam from people who thought that night was a real-life changing of the guard.

Just two weeks after the big match was the week where Austin statistically, with an exclamation point, became the biggest television ratings draw in the business.

His two segments saw Raw win them each by two full ratings points. An Austin interview moved Raw from a 4.4 to 5.6., and an Austin match moved Raw from a 4.8 to a 6.00—meaning when he appeared on the show, each time, a total of 1.6 million viewers were added—most of which came directly from the viewership of the other show. Less than three months after Raw ended Nitro's nearly two-year win streak, the battle for No. 1 in the ratings was almost over. Nitro did have a few good nights, such as the first night Ultimate Warrior was brought in—he drew one incredible quarter and two weeks later didn't mean a thing; or by putting the famous DDP & Karl Malone vs. Dennis Rodman & Hogan match on television for free a few weeks after the PPV (which actually broke the Hogan vs. Goldberg single match record); but they became the rarities.

Still, that tag match with DDP & Malone vs. Rodman & Hogan became the biggest mainstream event in WCW history. It did 600,000 buys, the company's second biggest PPV ever. WCW got a lucky break as Malone and Rodman's respective teams went into the NBA championship finals, and they even had a highly publicized near skirmish when getting tangled up battling for a loose ball, where to a national basketball audience, their WCW PPV match was brought up, as well as in nearly every newspaper and local sportscast in the country. It was such a perfect moment, that with the match already known, many suspected it was planned. The match itself was a disaster because Rodman blew off all his training sessions and partied all night before the match, and then all day of the match after disappearing. He ended up zonked out in the corner. Rodman ruined the match for Malone, who trained very hard and earned tremendous respect from all involved going into the match. But in a tight war, after WWF had gotten the Tyson publicity, WCW had gotten similar publicity.

The next month, they tried again, this time involving Jay Leno in a match. There is a rule of wrestling promotion regarding gimmicks. When a good idea is used sparingly, it works. When overused, even the best idea will end up being a negative. After Rodman and Malone, WCW wasn't going to draw with a celebrity angle for a long time. So they went a month later with Jay Leno & DDP vs. Hogan & Bischoff. It didn't bomb, and it got the company publicity, but the PPV numbers were way down. In hindsight, Bischoff chalked it up to Leno not being a physical threat. In fact, the newspaper shots of Hogan selling for Leno, looked ridiculous. Leno was so unathletic that on the day of the match he was told to do as little as possible, to the point they asked Kevin Eubanks to do the finish instead of Leno. It got so bad that after the match, Nash yelled at Hogan for selling for Leno, saying it made the profession look ridiculous.

By the fall, Bischoff was broken. Keep in mind the company's biggest live shows were still to come, so it was the losing to Vince and not the

state of the company itself that was getting to him.

Referring to that period, he said, "As time went on, it became clear to anyone who worked with me that emotionally I'd thrown in the towel. I told people that if things didn't change, I was getting out."

That is a contradiction of how he portrayed things not that many pages earlier. Again, who is the scapegoat?

"The dirt sheets began filling up with backstage gossip and rumors of what was going on behind the scenes. Wrestlers and staff leaked a lot of information, sometimes to benefit themselves directly, sometimes just to stir the shit. In their twisted minds, they thought the dissension would benefit them."

I doubt anyone "leaked" much more information than Bischoff, but the organization was collapsing on all sides. And this was at a time they were still making money hand-over-fist. But giving people bad television, constant no-shows at the house shows, and treating customers with nothing but arrogance was never going to last as a viable way to run the business, particularly when facing opposition that had its act together. Plus, the talent on top were more into beating the system short-term than helping the company, which would have been the best for everyone long-term.

He also couldn't even remember the 1998 Halloween Havoc problem.

"I don't remember what happened at Halloween Havoc, but I assume that the earlier matches ran over significantly. At some point, we realized we had a problem, and we scrambled. We got hold of the PPV companies and explained what was going on, asking for more satellite time. For the most part, we were given reason to believe that we had the additional time."

In actuality, the week or so before the show, the company decided to do something unpredictable. Everyone knew the PPV shows end at between 10:40 and 10:50 p.m. To surprise people, they made plans to end the show at about 11:20 p.m. The problem was, WCW's point man in charge of alerting the PPV companies dropped the ball, unbeknownst to everyone else in the company. They booked long and scheduled long, and then, at 11 p.m., most, not but all companies, turned the show off, before the Goldberg vs. DDP world title match main event. He claimed this screw-up caused the big company to want to get rid of WCW. The company was still making huge money, and while I'm sure some people high up at Turner/Time Warner were embarrassed about owning a wrestling company, it was just weeks before Jesse Ventura would win the Governorship. Wrestling was from a non-wrestling fan perspective, the coolest it had ever been.

No one night ended things for WCW, but January 4, 1999, may have been the epitome of it falling apart. The first show back at the Georgia Dome in Atlanta since Goldberg's title win, the one Hogan played his role in to perfection, saw the "losing" company draw 34,788 paid and 38,809 people in a building set up for 46,000, and set what would end up being the company's all-time live gate record at \$930,735. It broke the gate record set two weeks earlier for Nitro at the TWA Dome in St. Louis, that did \$914,389. Instead of being happy about the record setting business, Bischoff was upset. He even snapped at Bresloff either the night of or the morning after the Georgia Dome show. He was mad because they had done three stadium shows in four weeks (they also ran two weeks before St. Louis at the Astrodome in Houston) and not one hit the \$1 million mark. After St. Louis, where they drew 28,959 paid at the TWA Dome in a blizzard for a show built around the return of Ric Flair, and set the record gate, he actually for the only time that year, tried to keep the attendance and gate numbers quiet. He was so out of whack with perception that he thought not doing 30,000 paid in a blizzard showed additional failure on top of the 4.71 to 3.99 rating loss. But even with the gap that big on paper, if you took out teenagers and children, Nitro had 3,249,000 adult viewers to 3,071,000 for Raw head-to-head, and the gap was larger when you factor in the replay airing. But WCW was beyond the point of panic. It's still amazing the first public sign of desperation, when Bischoff challenged McMahon to the fight, came only a few weeks after Raw won the ratings for the first time in two years, and with WCW doing generally the best business in its history.

Still, in December, Bischoff nearly put together a deal that could have changed the early stages of 1999. The NBA was going through a work stoppage and NBC had tons of time allotted for games that they suddenly needed to fill. In what would have been almost an ultimate counter move, he reached a deal for two Sunday night prime time specials, set for February 14 and March 28, head-to-head with a Valentine's Day Massacre PPV WWF was doing, as well as Wrestlemania. It would mark the first "Super Sunday" (where Mania would be countered by WCW programming) since 1989, a decade earlier. While the deal was never completed, WCW had gotten far enough to where they had already rented out the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas for both dates. The idea for one of the two dates was to have Hogan defending the title against Goldberg, although it wasn't decided if they should do it on the first show, or use the first show to shoot the angle and put the match, which would have most likely been the title change back to Goldberg, opposite Mania. That was more the idea of

Bischoff and Bresloff of how to get maximum impact against Mania, and it isn't clear if Hogan was on board with it. Bischoff also pushed the idea of having Rodman and Carmen Electra doing a live real divorce. WCW had tried without success on several occasions to do an angle with Rodman and Electra. In fact, one of WCW's most famous open ended angles, the mysterious driver of a humvee that was never revealed was at first scheduled to be Electra, but she backed out.

NBC-TV had said they would heavily push the show, using many of its biggest stars to make appearances, including Matthew Perry ("Friends" was the network's biggest hit) appearing on the first show. The original deal was for six Sunday night dates on NBC in 1999, with the idea they would often or even always be held on WWF PPV dates. While the idea did come about due to the NBA work stoppage, three of those six dates were to be in prime time on Sundays after the NBA season was over.

Ironically, when WWF found out about this, they contacted NBC, both mad because of free TV dates being set-up head-to-head with their PPVs, and also mad because NBC didn't come to them. WWF and NBC had a relationship from 1985-1991 for the Saturday Night's Main Event series and if NBC was looking for wrestling, with WWF taking over the lead and having Steve Austin's feud with Vince McMahon, they couldn't understand why NBC would go with WCW. NBC told WWF that there was no deal, which, technically, there wasn't.

It never really was clear why the deal fell apart at the time. The only thing we heard at the time was the Time Warner higher-ups dragged their feet on finalizing it to where it wasn't signed before the NBA work stoppage ended in early January. At that point, NBC would have had no interest.

In the book, Bischoff talked about the specials, but never noted that it would go head-to-head with WWF PPV shows, most notably the second date scheduled against Wrestlemania.

Bischoff said that the higher-ups at the company in January turned down the idea flat. Bischoff's explanation was that he was told if wrestling was on NBC, it would make it difficult for TBS and TNT to sell ads on Nitro and Thunder. That doesn't make sense on the surface, because one would think a product having the credibility of being on a network would up its profile to advertisers. In hindsight, nobody would ever say the old Saturday Night's Main Event were anything but a gigantic positive for WWF in the 80s. But a lot of corporate decisions don't make sense. Bischoff in his book claimed nobody even told him the decision was nixed for a while after, and he was stalling NBC waiting for the go-ahead. There may be some truth to this, but there is a huge time line problem.

"The only way to explain that decision is this: there were people at a very high level in the Turner/Time Warner organization, who absolutely did not want WCW to succeed," Bischoff wrote. "They did everything they could, from early 1998, to lay the groundwork for WCW's failure, so they could get WCW off the books."

That creates his scapegoat for the company doing the worst television on record, something he was very willing to address and admit to in 2001, but now in his book acted like it never happened.

In fact, on the 1/11 Nitro, they announced officially the show called "Love Hurts" to take place in Las Vegas on 2/14. The very next day, the show was quietly canceled and never took place. It is possible there was an order from above not to let wrestling on NBC, but the cancellation of the show by NBC came the same week the NBA strike ended. What we had heard at the time was that company management dragged its feet on signing the deal, and then the strike ended, and NBC lost interest. In fact, to show Bischoff's story seems to have a few flaws, after NBC canceled the show, Bischoff went to TNT and asked for a live two-hour special from 8-10 p.m. Eastern on 2/14. TNT agreed. The reason the show was scrapped altogether is the many key celebrity appearances were not going to happen without NBC's participation.

The television and angles that ran off viewers at a pace that no company in history could ever match is an issue he completely avoided, instead blaming it on dirtsheets and upper management, all of which were there a year earlier when business was booming. In his mind it wasn't that viewers stopped caring and the company went from immensely profitable to ridiculous losses in one year, but that it was a conspiracy from above to ruin the company. Unfortunately, the problem with that theory is that all the decisions that turned off a large percentage of regular fans from continuing to buy tickets and PPVs, came by people in the wrestling company. His big bad merger theory is also destroyed by the time line. The Turner/Time Warner merger was in 1996, well before the company's glory days. The AOL merger went down in 2001. Granted, the company did want to dump its money losing divisions before the merger. But with the level of losses WCW had in 2000, even without the merger, they'd have been in big trouble. In the big picture, the \$6 million annually in losses the division brought in most of the period of 1989 to 1993 was

more than worth it because they were getting hours per week of programming that in general was doing better ratings than the station would be doing with other programming. There were still people who were high up in the company who wanted to dump it because of the negative connotation of pro wrestling. By the middle of 1998, wrestling was such an in-thing that the negative connotation was largely gone, particularly when the corporate executives saw the Hogan-Goldberg match live. You think a TV company wasn't down with a franchise that was near the top every week in the cable ratings and getting major magazine covers that year, including *TV Guide*?

But that same company without any of that and with \$60 million plus in annual losses is something completely different.

AOL would have hardly been interested in dumping a profitable division that also created the perception through the boost in ratings that the cable stations were flourishing. If the TV and house shows were good and decisions were being made from above to replace people who were successful and replace them with dunderheads, that theory would have some relevance. Unless Bischoff was ordered to beat Goldberg, give the book to Nash, and told that wrestling storylines had to get completely ridiculous, ordered Bischoff to falsely advertise talent at house shows and make sure a large percentage of main events go only a few minutes, and the multitude of other issues that led to it going down in early 1999, the blame is misguided. Yes, blowing the NBC deal hurt a great opportunity. But they didn't lose one existing fan over it. Their paying audience was starting to dwindle at a record rate, and it was the fault of whomever was in charge of the creative end—which at times was Bischoff, and at times as the decline escalated, Bischoff had nothing to do with. But he was the man in charge when the snowball started rolling downhill. By the time he was dumped and Vince Russo was put in charge, that snowball had garnered a lot of momentum. Things did get worse after he was dumped, but the seeds were planted under his watch.

Blaming anyone else but the creative failure from mid-1998 until the close three years later for anything more than a very small percentage of the destruction of the company is a cop out. No question after the creative failure, a lot of people in the organization wanted to wash their hands of the product, but blaming them for the company going down is like blaming the SEC when they delist a company for its later bankruptcy.

Kevin Nash ended Goldberg's winning streak by taking the title at Starrcade. Goldberg getting his rematch at the Georgia Dome to repeat the Hogan scenario of a title win before a huge crowd was what everyone expected. Instead, they got a horrible storyline where Elizabeth accused Goldberg of sexual harassment and he was held at the police station until the closing moments of the show. Hogan, who had missed those record breaking shows in his so-called run for president of the United States (where today he claims polls showed he would have beaten Bill Clinton, but he nixed the idea of running because son Nicholas was worried he'd be shot), showed up and did the famed one finger touch to Nash, who laid down and Hogan won the title. Goldberg finally showed up doing a run-in, but he was zapped by Scott Hall's cattle prod, handcuffed to he ropes, and they spray painted his head and back.

Ironically, what is most remembered about that Nitro broadcast is something different. On two occasions during the show, Bischoff ordered Tony Schiavone, who took incredible and undeserved heat for it, to tell fans that Raw was taped and that on Raw, Mick Foley would be winning the world title, "so don't switch the channel." By this point, Foley had become one of the most beloved characters in the business, and while he had main evented many big shows, he was not the type of person that either promotion would have ever considered making world champion. His beating Rock was more McMahon giving him his moment as a reward for his hard work as opposed to any changing of the guard. Rock and Austin were clearly the two big stars, even if HHH and Shawn Michaels were doing everything in their power to bury Rock and tell Vince McMahon he wasn't worthy of being in a singles main event at Wrestlemania. As absurd as it sounds to advertise that Foley's lifetime moment would be on the other station, Bischoff was so far gone that he thought it would keep people from turning the channel. Worse, Schiavone came off as a heel by saying that Foley used to wrestle as Cactus Jack in WCW, and when mentioning his getting the world title, said sarcastically, "That'll put butts in the seats." WWF was doing its own commentary live even though the show was taped. When they heard those comments, they shot back and said Raw tonight would not have a main event that starts two minutes before the show goes off the air and consists of nothing but walking and talking, which was becoming another bad pattern on Nitro.

Bischoff did not give away Raw results on Nitro all the time. It was done strategically, when Nitro was going to present something better. Bischoff would ask around to many different people before the show on nights he considered doing it, whether it was the right week for it.

He asked around before this show. I don't know what everyone told

him, but I do know at least two people who he usually listened to in these matters were adamant this was not the week to do it. It had nothing to do with ruining Foley's moment or anyone liking Foley, although most WCW wrestlers at the time liked him and thought it was a cheap shot for entirely non-business reasons as well. It was the obvious, that telling people something historic is on the other channel will cause hundreds of thousands of people to switch, which is exactly what happened. Why Bischoff ignored the obvious is something he's never answered, and in describing the incident, he doesn't address any of this. His defense was simply that he didn't see why people made such a big deal about it because WCW had done the same thing many times before, and that people overreacted when they said that incident turned things around.

"Giving WWE (sic) endings away was something we'd done from the very beginning, though the dirtsheet writers seemed to have forgotten that at the time. They thought it was new, and a sudden fit of pique on my part. There were stories I was angry with WWE about some slight, imagined or otherwise. I wasn't. People did switch from our program to theirs, at least according to the Nielsen ratings. I don't think it really mattered a bit. By that point, the tide had turned so significantly that us talking about one match didn't matter."

They had done the biggest gate the company would ever do that night, yet Bischoff had long since mentally thrown in the towel. In fact, more people watched wrestling that night than any time before. Raw, with the taped show with the Foley title win, drew a 5.76 rating, its all-time record up to that point. Nitro did a 4.96 rating, far higher than it had done in a long time, because they spent the show pushing the idea that Goldberg would be getting his title rematch, only to not deliver. Head-to-head, 11,780,000 people were watching wrestling during the two combined hours. These numbers were even more impressive than they sound, because both shows were going head-to-head with not only Raw, but the 1999 Fiesta Bowl game which determined college football's national championship that year, that pulled a 17.2 rating. At the moment Schiavone made the announcement about the title change on Raw, approximately 375,000 homes and 560,000 viewers switched over the next two minutes.

But even then, WCW was still winning with adults. Even a week after this, while WWE won handily in overall viewership, the three-hour Nitro did a 4.99 rating. It had long since been about the strength of the company. It was all about who won in the ratings. In doing so, every week they were mortgaging their future by not doing anything to build it.

Anyone who has been on top for any length of time in almost any sport or business has learned to both win and lose. Those who don't stand the test of time are those who can't mentally handle losing, or those who refuse to learn the business they are in and by doing so, keep losing. WCW was still a long way from losing money. Quite frankly, at the end of 1998, the idea they could lose money seemed preposterous unless you looked beneath the surface and saw the seeds planed for the big collapse. But at this point, the only losing going on was in head-to-head ratings. And even after eight months of Austin-McMahon and the taking off of the WWF, head-to-head, the only difference was that WCW didn't do as well with children.

When 1998 was over WCW had increased live attendance 47% over the previous year. Television ratings overall were up 56%. PPV was up 18%. The company sold out 49% of its house shows during the calendar year. Of course, WWF had increased in every category significantly more, and the Wrestlemania with Tyson was the biggest event of the year. During 1998, WCW did \$38 million in house show business, and WWF did \$40 million. Few know it or remember it, but for the overall calendar year of 1998, it was WCW that did better overall television ratings and sold out a greater percentage of house shows (WWF sold out 34% of its events that year).

That eight-day period of Starrcade and January 4<sup>th</sup>, ended the most successful one-month house show business month in history. It was not the direct cause of the collapse only a few months away. But it sped the timetable up greatly.

\*\*\*\*\*